If It's Not Funny, Why Am I Laughing?

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and their father

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If It's Not Funny, Why Am I Laughing?

Chapter One

Ever since my best friend, Tuna McElliott, told me a month ago that she is no longer a virgin, my entire outlook on life has changed. Up until then if anyone had asked me if I was happy or unhappy, I would've said I was one of the best-adjusted fifteen-year-olds I'd ever come across.

Of course, my father and stepmother might say something different . . . but no matter. It's how the individual views herself that counts. I'm in the top quarter of the sophomore class at Hugh McNally High School, am assistant editor on the *Viewpoint,* and I'm a budding artist, sort of. I also have occasional dates and am not suicidal that I'm not super pretty and super popular like Tuna.

But now, *now* that I know Tuna's in love with Dub

Mann and has gone all the way—well, I feel I'm losing ground. I realize there are many things in life about which I know zero.

"Tuna," I say as she applies "Redi When You Are," her father's company's newest lipstick, "I feel that I am losing ground."

She's sitting at her mother's vanity table, trying out some new look she read about in *Seventeen* magazine. It looks like the old look to me, but I know better than to say so.

"What're you talking about now, Mimi?"

"Well, I go out on dates and everything, but so far not one boy has made a serious pass at me. I mean, I must be doing something wrong."

Tuna flicks her tongue over her lips. She has practically no mouth at all, which is why she always wears lipstick. Otherwise her lips'd be invisible. "Come on, Mimi"—she rolls her gigantic brown eyes my way—"just last week you were freaking over those hickeys Larry—I mean Lars—Petronelli gave you at Soozie Saltis's birthday party."

"True," I say, "but I don't consider plain old making out a pass. He also hasn't called me since then. God, I may as well face facts. I'm not appealing to men."

"That's not so and you know it." Tuna turns to face me. "You're one of the cutest . . . Well, no, *cute* isn't the word. . . . You're one of the most attractive . . . No, that's not it either. Now, don't look at me like that!

You're—you're very . . . *distinctive*. Yuh, that's it. You have this really distinctive look, Meem." She looks enormously relieved at having found the right term for my wildly frizzy red hair, oversized blue eyes (they called me Pop-eye in the fifth grade), and definitely square jaw. Sigh.

"Now I really am going to kill myself." I slump down into Mrs. McElliott's daybed. It looks like a regular couch to me, but who am I to argue with the chief decorator for W & J Sloane's? Closing my eyes, I toy with the idea of plastic surgery.

"You want my honest opinion about something, Meem?" Tuna's tone of voice, one of deep sincerity, brings me back to the here and now.

"Yeah, okay. Tell me the truth. What am I doing wrong?"

"Well, you really need to be more, like . . ."

"Spit it out, Tuna. I can hack it."

"Meem, you need to be more . . . mysterious, know what I mean?"

I shake my head, making her roll her big eyes at the ceiling. Then, "Well, Meem . . . you laugh too much."

"So? Since when is laughing a bad habit?"

"It's, like, it's not too sexy, Meem. Seriously, you've got to get more serious about . . . life. You need a deeper facade, you know? You just can't go around being so cheerful all the time. Guys like girls"—she pats her curly blond hair fondly—"who act like there's more to them than meets the eyes."

I look down at my figure, which I prefer to call slight as opposed to downright nonexistent.

"Your shape is . . . nice, Meem. Honest."

This is one thing about Tuna. She can be tactful as hell, really.

"And your nose is good. . . ."

"You want to check out my teeth, too?" I open my mouth wide and burst out laughing. Tuna is completely disgusted.

"That's exactly what I mean. You're always fooling around. You've got to stop it, Mimi."

"Okay." I sigh. "I get your drift. It's just hard to be different from the way you are. And besides, sometimes I think if I didn't joke around so much, I'd go around bawling."

"Yuh, I know." Tuna widens her brown eyes, nodding sympathetically. "It must be horrible having your parents be divorced and now having a *step*-mother." She shudders. "Like, I can't even imagine that."

"I was only kidding." I don't want to get onto the subject—not even with my best friend. It brings up too many things I like not to think about.

My mother is Agatha Canfield, the comedienne. She's been in a number of films and on TV. She took off for the West Coast six years ago. Just wanted to check the Hollywood scene out, she said. I think Dad and I knew from the beginning that she wouldn't be back, but for a long time we pretended it was only

temporary. That Aggie wasn't good enough to make it in the big time. Well, she was good enough.

Dad and I had some pretty heavy father/daughter talks in those days after Aggie left. He told me that Aggie got bored being in the Country Playhouse's little productions. The Country Playhouse is this pretty good community theater in the town next door to the one we live in. But it's strictly amateur and Aggie wanted to be a professional actress.

Dad also explained that some people just aren't cut out for marriage and parenthood and that Aggie was one of them. He told me not to worry, though; I would always have him. I remember that wasn't a whole lot of comfort at the time. I mean, how many nine-year-old kids are there who don't need their mothers?

What I always wanted to ask, but never quite dared, was what right do people who aren't cut out for parenthood have to go ahead and become parents? I mean, it's kind of a dirty trick to pull on the kid.

Anyway, after a year or so, Dad told Aggie he was going to sue for divorce if she didn't come home in a couple of months. Meanwhile, by that time she'd gotten a small part in a movie and had played a couple of clubs. As far as I know, Aggie never did say one way or another whether she was coming home or wanted a divorce. That's how Aggie operates. She lets other people make decisions for her so she can concentrate on her "comic art," as she calls it. So Dad and

Aggie got divorced a few years ago, and six months ago he married Cassandra.

No one should feel sorry for me that my mother is some freaked-out lady who abandoned her only kid. She calls me every month, usually. Unless she's got a club date or something. And my father and I get along okay. The truth is I don't think he and I ever had a real conversation while Aggie lived with us. Maybe that was because there was usually quite a bit of uproar when Aggie was here. She was always working on some comic routine she'd made up, practicing it on me and Dad. Or she was reciting lines from one of her Country Playhouse roles. I mean, not even *I* want to laugh all the time, for Pete's sake. But if you *didn't* laugh, Aggie went absolutely bonkers.

If you ask me, Dad and Aggie were a weird couple. I mean, he's a man of strong character, on the quiet side but not totally humorless. He commutes into New York City every day, plays golf, and does *The New York Times* crossword puzzle most Sundays. He also reads a lot of American history. Plus, he's fairly neat and tidy.

Aggie wasn't. Even with cleaning help once a week, our house was a mess. There were always piles of scripts and papers with her scribblings all over the place, and half-eaten bits of food and whatnot on plates in the dining and living rooms. Boy, but Aggie's untidiness really drove Dad crazy. They fought about that all the time.

It's different with Cassandra being around. She's all right, I guess, though she's not a demonstrative person. She isn't one to hug or kiss you much—which is fine by me, seeing as I'm not big on that stuff with parents or stepparents, anyway. But Cassandra and I get along okay.

I mean, life could be a whole lot worse. I remind myself of this fairly often. Sometimes it helps—sometimes it doesn't.

Meanwhile, Tuna's sitting over there with her gigantic eyes fixed on me. She's dying to have me unload about my stepmother, I know. I've told her about a million times that Cassandra's not bad, but Tuna's convinced that all stepmothers are like Cinderella's or something. And when Tuna gets an idea in her mind, boy, there's no changing it. So I switch the subject.

"What's sex like, Tuna? Tell me everything, your emotions and everything while you're . . . you know."

Aside from Dub, sex is her favorite topic these days, and as if I've pushed a button, she's off and running.

"Oh, wow, it's, like, the most wonderful thing . . . when you have the kind of relationship Dub and I have." She stares dreamily into space, but her eyes keep coming back to me to check out my reaction. I prop myself up on my elbows and wait for her to go on.

"He's so tender, so romantic. Like, when he gave me a ride home from school yesterday, he told me about this dream he had the night before. Catch this"

—she flicks her tongue over her lips— "Dub dreamed my name was written in flames across the sky . . . can't you just see it? *Tuna* in huge, flaming letters? Dub says his dream's a sign of his deep, passionate feeling for me. . . ."

Good thing she's so into Dub's dream that she doesn't notice that I'm struggling to control myself. I mean, anyone who dreams about a name like Tuna written in fire has to be *cracked*. I manage to compose my expression just as she looks my way again.

"He's the love of my life, Meem."

All desire to laugh evaporates. "I'd give anything to have the love of my life," I tell her. "There are times I'm so lonely I think I'm just going to fall down and die. But Cassandra says fifteen is too young to be in love. We watched this documentary last week while Dad was out. It was about teen-agers and sex and all that. Cassandra says kids who get involved in sex because they think they're in love are kidding themselves."

"Dub's seventeen and a half." Tuna pushes out her little lower lip. "What does your stepmother know about him anyway? And I'm very mature for my age. My mother says so."

Just then Mrs. McElliott calls, "Fortuna! I'm home!" We hear her feet running up the stairs. Mrs. McElliott rarely moves unless it's at a dead run.

"Oh, here you are, darling! Hello, Mimi. I didn't know you were here. I'm in a total swivet. Have to

make the five twenty-five. I'm meeting Daddy at the train station, Fortuna. I told you, didn't I? No, I guess I didn't. Daddy and I are going into New York . . ." She kicks off her high heels and starts rummaging through her closet. ". . . to the Philharmonic with the Wimples. Zubin's conducting."

"Zubin?" Tuna says.

"God, you mean Zubin Mehta, the conductor? I didn't know you knew him, Mrs. McElliott. That's really something!"

Mrs. McElliott looks kind of embarrassed as she pulls on a new pair of pantyhose. "I don't actually *know* him, dear. That's what everyone calls him. Well, everyone in the know, that is." She laughs her tinkling laugh. "Now, where is my white cashmere jacket? Downstairs or up?" She thinks for a second. "Must be down. There's a frozen flounder dinner for you, Fortuna. Put it in the microwave, okay, sweetie? Now"—Mrs. McElliott takes a few swipes at her blond hair, which she wears pulled tightly off her face twisted into a roll in back—"I think that will . . . just . . . about . . . do it. Do your homework, dear. Mother trusts you and don't wait up. We'll be late." Kissing Tuna on her forehead, Mrs. McElliott walks briskly out of the room, her high heels clicking down the uncarpeted hall.

We wait until we hear the door slam. Tuna looks deflated, like a balloon someone has pricked. She's alone a lot of the time because her parents are these

super busy people and Brink, her older brother, is in his last year at Hotchkiss.

"Well," I say cheerfully, "speaking of those in the know—does your mother know . . . about you and Dub?"

A wide smile lights up Tuna's face. "Oh, wow! That's all she'd need. She'd get a migraine for a month!"

"Yeah, that's kind of what I figured."

"You going to Curt Wall's party on Saturday?" Tuna asks, pulling out a mess of eyebrows. "Ow!" She glares accusingly at the tweezers.

Tuna's a natural blonde but has these really dark eyebrows that would take over her face if she didn't pluck them constantly. This image of a hairy-faced Tuna pops into my mind and I break up.

"Wow, you're silly, Mimi. Are you going to Curt's or not?"

"I guess."

"I'll ask Dub to give you a ride, okay?"

"Sure. Only problem is Cassandra and my father are extremely hung up about my curfew. I have to be home by midnight, right when the party'll be taking off."

"That's no problem." Tuna's tone makes me sit up straight. "I'll invite you to spend the night here. Then your stepmother won't know what time you get home because I don't have a curfew. It's simple."

"Good idea," I say.

Chapter Two

"That sounds like a bad idea," Cassandra says. She's sitting at the dining-room table, typing. Before she married my father, Cassandra was a social worker in upstate New York. Now she's writing a book on her experiences.

"Didn't you tell me there was a party you wanted to go to tomorrow night?" She turns her electric typewriter off and looks at me. She's got a mind like a steel trap.

"Oh, yeah. The party at Walls'. Forgot about that."

"I'll bet. Why don't you ask Tuna to spend the night here? That way the two of you can walk home from the Walls' together. I wouldn't mind you walking home if someone were with you. The Walls are only three houses down Riverview Avenue, aren't they?"

So I call Tuna, who says, "Rats! Well, never mind. I can probably come up with another plan. Tell her I'll spend the night. Wow, but your stepmother is paranoid."

Saturday afternoon I'm sitting on my bed making faces in a mirror, trying to look mysterious and alluring. Somehow both elude me. I still look like some wimp and I'll be sixteen in eight weeks and two days: June 29.

"What on earth are you doing?" Cassandra asks, making me jump about a mile. I hadn't realized she was standing in the doorway watching me.

"Tuna says boys are attracted to mysterious women, so . . . I'm practicing mysterious."

"Why don't you try putting that mop up? You've got nice hair. It won't go gray as early as dark hair does." Cassandra sighs.

This is one thing I know she's vain about. I've caught her a number of times standing in front of the bathroom mirror pulling gray hairs out of her chin-length black hair. She won't admit it's a losing battle.

"Answer me one question," Cassandra says. "I've always wondered why you wrap your hair around that . . . that *soup* can. How do you sleep with that thing on your head?" She points at the large knot on top of my head.

"My hair's so thick it's the only thing that keeps it

from frizzing out. Rollers aren't big enough. Campbell's is the best," I assure her.

She eyes me for a few more moments. "You really are too much," she says finally and goes away.

Fifteen minutes later, I've canned the alluring faces and am back to making the usual ugly ones, which never fail to break me up.

"Oh, Mimi"—Cassandra walks by—"now what are you doing? Never mind, don't answer that. I don't really want to know. What was the name of that boy who's giving you a ride tonight?"

"Dub. Dub Mann."

"Dub?" She curls her upper lip slightly. "Are you serious? What kind of a name is that?"

"It's short for W. His full name is Willis Robert Mann only he signs it W. Robert Mann so everyone calls him Dub for short. He's an extremely serious boyfriend of Tuna's."

"Whenever you bug your eyes like that," Cassandra says, "I know you're trying to tell me something. What is it you're indicating . . . ?" She leans against the doorjamb, her hand on her hip. I can tell she's trying not to show she's amused. Cassandra keeps a straight face. Only my father can really make her smile.

"Tuna says Dub's the love of her life."

"How does she know? Has she ever been in love before?"

"Hmmm. Not that I know of. . . . I'll have to ask her about that."

"All I have to say is"—she straightens up—"I think it'd be pretty hard to take seriously any boy who calls himself *Dub*."

Tuna arrives at six so we have plenty of time to do our thing before Dub shows up. She has a small duffel bag, which contains her nightgown, toothbrush, change of underwear, and this absolutely huge makeup bag. It's just my luck that my father works for *Time* magazine so all we get is free magazines while Tuna's dad has a cosmetics company over on the south side of town. Fortunately, Tuna is extremely generous and believes in sharing the wealth.

It doesn't take her long to get around to giving me a few pointers.

"Just remember tonight," she says, "to be friendly, but not too friendly." She widens her brown eyes, which look even bigger than usual because of all the eye liner.

I nod intelligently though I don't have too clear an idea of what being "too" friendly is.

"And," she goes on, "do *not* act like one of the boys, which is what you usually do, Meem, honest. I'm not trying to put you down, but at Soozie's party last week, you had all the guys in hysterics playing that dumb game. It made the girls furious not to mention doing nothing for your general mystique."

She's talking about this game, Twister, that Soozie's mother brought out. "Miz" Saltis (she's divorced from Mr. Saltis and prefers that designation) is one of those

pal-type parents who believe in organizing her kid's parties—even in high school.

Anyway, I was the last girl to be disqualified from Twister, this crazy game where you have to move your hands and feet (but only one at a turn) around different colored squares on this plastic sheet. You end up in some pretty weird positions. The boys were absolutely howling when I had to get under Jerry Striggles's legs without moving my left hand and foot.

There doesn't seem to be any point in pursuing this subject, so I change it.

"You figured out how we're going to stay out past midnight?"

Tuna smiles smugly and flicks her tongue over her mouth. "Dub will bring us home at midnight, no sweat. Do you remember that time you and I snuck out of your house, the time Brink and his friend slept out in the treehouse?"

"You mean the time your mother wouldn't let you sleep out with the boys so you spent the night over here and we went . . . uh-oh . . . down the pine tree."

"Right. And we scared the living you-know-what out of Brink. We did it then, so we can do it now. And besides, there's no other way to sneak out of this house . . . the floor squeaks too much. Your father's bedroom is at the front of the house. . . . They won't hear us. We'll just hop right out on the porch roof and go down the pine tree. It'll be a cinch!"

Unfortunately, what looks like a cinch is often not.

I think they call it Murphy's Law—whatever can go wrong, will.

W. Robert Mann shows up on the dot of eight, shakes hands with my father, calls him "sir," the whole bit. I think he overdoes it a little calling Cassandra "ma'am." Cassandra has hazel eyes, which I've noticed can be extremely cold when she's mad or something.

Dub says, "Nice to meet you, ma'am," and right away I know she thinks he's a creep from the way she looks at him without blinking.

I don't think Dub realizes it, though. He's one of those guys who tries hard to be charming as hell. Consequently, he misses a lot.

As I crawl into the backseat of his Capri, Dub says, "Hey, Mimi, your stepmother's a nice-looking lady. Got a grip like a man, though."

"Dub prefers feminine women." Tuna smiles lovingly and snuggles up against him as he tries to make a right-hand turn out of our driveway. "Ouch! This stupid gearshift!"

I have to look out the window to control myself. Dub's Capri has bucket seats with the gearshift sticking up in the middle. That's what Tuna just stabbed herself on. A Capri is not real conducive to cuddling. God, Tuna's right . . . I am silly.

"Oh, Dubby, how many times have I told you to pull out your collar after putting on a sweater?" Yanking his collar out, Tuna glances back at me.

How Dub is managing to drive with her squashing up against him and rearranging his clothing, I have no idea. I slap my hand over my mouth. Boy, am I glad we're almost there. I don't know how much more of this I can take.

Walls' driveway is packed so we park on the street. Dub helps Tuna out, then pulls the front seat forward for me. Of course, I catch my foot in the seat belt and to keep from falling, grab Tuna, which propels her into Dubby.

All the way up the driveway Tuna complains, "Wow, Mimi, I think maybe something's broken . . . a rib, maybe. Ow, it really hurts. Wow . . ."

Curt's parents are away for the weekend so he's invited about a hundred kids. The music is turned up so loud I can feel it reverberating under my feet as I go down to the family room.

"Ay-y, Canfield!" Headlight Hansen slaps me on the back, spilling the beer someone has just handed me down the front of my sweater.

"Oh, hi, Headlight. How are you?" Smiling like the good sport that I am, I shake Pabst Blue Ribbon off my hand. There're times I think I really show amazing self-control. I mean, most girls would've either fallen over headfirst from the force of his friendly greeting or they would've screamed bloody murder. I'm five three, weighing 105 on my fattest days . . . not exactly an Amazon.

But all I do is flex my shoulder blades, just to make sure they still flex, and smile at good old Headlight. Meanwhile I'm also trying to look around without looking as if I'm looking, and hoping, *praying* someone, *anyone* will come to my rescue.

No one does, though. No one ever does. I end up dancing with Headlight at every party. His real name's Peter, I think. He's a terrific athlete with a terrific build. He'd probably be cute if it weren't for his problem—everyone calls him Headlight because he's got this case of acne that's so bad it looks as if it might be contagious. Really. The nickname comes from these two horrendously large zits, one over each eye like (you've got it) headlights.

Besides the skin problem, Headlight dances like a scarecrow that's been sniffing something. Holy crud, I wish I had a mean streak so I could tell him to get lost. He ought to dance with the girls who are attracted to him—there're a few floating around McNally High.

One thing I do have is an extreme inhibition when it comes to fast dancing (which is what I call this stuff I'm doing right now), even when I'm not worrying about spilling a full can of beer down someone's back.

Maybe God does take pity on me once in a while. Someone's just switched the Elvis Costello for extremely romantic, slow Barry Manilow and I can escape Head—

"Yikes!" I yell as he throws his long, skinny arms around my short, skinny bod, rocking me in time to the music. Well, sort of in time.

"Uh, sorry, kids . . . didn't mean to crash into you like that. Sorry, Jill, Pat . . . uh, excuse me, Headlight . . . but I've got to go to the john . . . the beer, you know?" I grin in an endearing way and start backing toward the stairs. Then I turn and tear out of there like Jaws is after me. Halfway up the stairs I crash into Tuna.

"Mimi," she says under her breath, "you look like a wild woman—what are you *doing* galloping around like this?" She glances over her shoulder to make sure we aren't being overheard.

"H-Headlight Hansen's after me."

"Oh, wow, no wonder. Come on!" She yanks me up the stairs. "Dub and I'll protect you." We pound into the living room and throw ourselves down on the carpet next to Dub.

"What's so funny?" Larry, I mean Lars, Petronelli asks, sitting down next to me. He hands me another Pabst and smiles that smile that practically makes me stutter.

Lars used to be Larry. He changed his name this year because he thinks Lars is cooler, I guess. I have this horrible time trying to remember not to call him Larry. It's sort of difficult, considering I've known him since the sixth grade.

One thing about Lars that hasn't changed is he's gorgeous: black hair, black eyes, and dimples. I've been crazy about him forever. Meanwhile he treats me like a sister or something . . . except for last weekend at Soozie Saltis's party when we made out. *Nobody* has ever kissed me the way Lars did.

"I see you finally stopped wearing a turtleneck, Canfield," Lars says with a straight face, but his eyes laugh. "Are they all gone?" He checks out my neck where he'd planted three little hickeys, all in a row.

I wouldn't confess this to a living soul, but not only did I not realize at the time he was giving me hickeys (of course I knew what they *were,* but I thought you could feel it when you got one; this is not necessarily so, as I found out), but I also didn't notice them when I got dressed last Sunday morning. Tuna pointed them out to me later in the day.

God, but sometimes I am such a turkey, it freaks even me out.

Headlight comes into the living room and says in this voice that must carry five miles, "There's my dancing partner!" like he's Fred and I'm Ginger.

As he lopes over to me, I say, "Help," in a tiny voice. He's grinning so widely I can see every one of his scraggly teeth. Headlight's extremely proud of being the right wing on McNally's hockey team.

Just as he reaches down for me (cowering on the floor), Lars says, "Buzz off, Hansen." And like that, Hansen buzzes off to the opposite side of the room.

When Lars jerks his head toward the hall, I don't think, I follow. First I look back at Headlight, who's talking a mile a minute to a bunch of kids. . . .

"Watch where you're going, Canfield," Lars says as I walk straight into his back. He laughs, pushing open a door. When he switches on the light, I understand why Curt had this door closed. This has got to be his room.

Curt is this extremely short person, about five two, I'd say. He wears clothes that look as if he sleeps in them and combs his hair about once a week—whether it needs it or not. He's also been growing a beard all year. You can almost pick out the mustache now. Boy, this room really reflects Curt's personality.

"Uh, do you think it's safe in here?" I ask, thinking that you could catch something from this room—a rare virus, maybe. Lars, who is wading through the stuff on the floor, misunderstands me.

"Don't worry, Canfield. I locked the door." Then, with one sweep of his muscular swimmer's arm, he wipes about six months' worth of clothes off the bed. Sitting down, he pats a spot next to him.

"C'mere, Canfield." He smiles that dynamite white smile. Lars should really do toothpaste ads. "Turn off the light first, will you."

I snap the wall switch off and feel my way across the room. It's pitch-black in here and I'm afraid of the dark. Never mind that I should've outgrown that by now. Of course, I stumble on something, which really

makes me nervous. Then my clog gets caught in something, a giant rodent's *mouth*, I think wildly, and I hurl myself at the bed.

"Ooof!" says Lars. "Watch it, will you? You almost broke my right arm . . . oooh . . ."

Oh, my God. Only I could do something like fall on and squash the limb of the man I love . . . well, the boy I have a crush on. So what do I do to add to this wonderful situation? I break up. What else?

If Tuna were here, she'd be so disgusted with me. Well, at least I'm not totally uncouth. I have the presence of mind to stop giggling when Lars kisses me.

And kisses me—like Tuna says—*Oh, wow!*

It's like I'm transported to dreamland or something, he kisses so terrific. But then . . . I realize that his hands are doing something . . . like, like fooling around with my *bra strap*. Oh, my *God*.

"Uh, Lars. Just a minute," I mumble. It's sort of hard to talk with some guy's lips plastered against yours. "Wh-what are you, uh, doing, Lars?"

Of course he can't understand a word and keeps right on fooling around back there. I decide I have to take action. So, summoning all of my strength, I wrench myself out of his arms, landing on the floor with a crash.

"Canfield?" Lars's bewildered voice comes down to me. I feel soft, squishy things on this disgusting floor.

"Canfield . . . what are you doing?"

Scrambling across the room on my hands and knees,

I snap on the light. Lars, whose eyes are scrunched shut, stops feeling around on the floor for me and straightens up. Once he's adjusted to the sudden light, his face assumes its usual self-confident, gorgeous expression.

"What's the matter, Canfield? I make you nervous or what?"

"A little," I admit, demure as hell. I walk over and sit next to him again. "It's just . . ." Remembering Tuna's advice, I pause to bat my baby blues at him. "I don't want to, you know, lead you on or anything, Lars."

For once I think I sound sophisticated and in control. And what happens? He cracks up!

"You are a . . ." He's holding his *sides* he's laughing so hard. "You really are . . . a sketch, Canfield. I mean it, you kill me!"

But it's okay because then he kisses me again. Everything is really great until I whisper sexily into his ear, "Lars? Do you, um, think maybe now . . . you could call me . . . Mimi?"

He breaks up again.

A femme fatale I am not.

Chapter Three

Dad's and Cassandra's light is still on when we get home, but their door is closed. Good thing. All it takes is two beers to make me look as if I've been on a drinking spree. I call through that we're home and then we go down the hall to my room.

"Whew!" I flop down on my bed. "I'm glad they didn't check out how I look."

"Yuh," Tuna says. "You look like you've been through the plant or something."

I look at her. "I believe the expression is 'through the mill,' Tuna." She shrugs as she stuffs a pillow under the covers of the other twin bed. "I'm kind of tired. . . . You sure you still want to go through with this?"

"Does a bear live in the woods?" she asks, and I put

my pillow over my face and giggle into it. She grabs the pillow off. "Get up so I can do your bed," she orders. "Wow, Meem, don't be a prude. I promised Dubby I was coming back. You can't make me walk down Riverview Avenue by myself."

She pushes a blond curl out of her eyes. It's humid for early May and Tuna's hair thrives on damp weather. She looks like a cherub or something. Adorable. Sometimes, when she isn't wearing any makeup, she looks like a three-year-old baby—that's if you don't look below her neck. Tuna is built like the proverbial brick outhouse.

Unlike Tuna, I note in the full-length mirror on the back of my door, I do not look adorable. My hair is having some kind of attack. I consider asking her to give me ten minutes while I wrap my hair around the soup can, but I decide not to. She's clearly hot to trot.

"It's kind of dark out there."

She rolls her eyes as she drags me over to the window. "Look at that full moon! We can see everything, Mimi. Come on, we haven't done anything crazy in ages. We'll only stay out an hour, okay? I swear it."

"Oh . . . okay."

"Good. Now you go first."

Well, that figures.

"Damn it to hell!" Tuna whispers somewhere overhead once I'm safely on the ground.

"What damn it to hell?" I whisper back. "What are

you *doing,* you turkey? Get down here and let's get going."

There might be a full moon, but it's dark up there in the middle of that pine tree. The shadows are moving . . . "Tuna, come *on!*"

"I can't—I'm caught! My sweater's twisted around something and . . . I can't . . . get it . . . off!"

"Oh, for fart's sake, I'm coming."

All the way back up, I ask myself *why* I let her talk me into these things, especially when I know how uncoordinated she is. It's just lucky for me this pine is huge and has thick, sturdy branches because I'd never be scrambling up and down it at midnight if it didn't. "Ouch!"

"Well, no one said you had to go so fast you ran into my foot," she giggles. "Be careful, why don't you?"

"Boy, you've got a nerve. All right, where're you caught? Oh, for crud's sake . . ."

She's giggling like crazy while I'm bumbling around trying to find where she's snagged. I mean, it is absolutely *pitch* up here. Finally I find the stub of the branch her sweater's wrapped around. I manage to get it off, mainly by yanking. There's a soft *r-r-rip*. Then I scramble back down the tree while Tuna swears furiously under her breath.

You have to jump about four feet from the ground because the lower branches aren't big enough to stand on. Tuna finally gets down to the last strong branch and stops.

"Now what're you laughing at, Mimi?" She is not amused. "Quit it! I need help! I'm afraid to jump!"

"Now she tells me."

"Come on, Mimi. I'm scared!"

"Sssh! Pipe down, will you?" I listen for a few moments to make sure we haven't woken anyone up—like the dead. I mean, she was practically hollering. But the only sounds are the breeze in the pine and the trickling of the river at the bottom of our hill. I reach up to give Tuna a hand.

Unfortunately Tuna must've thought I—the wimp of the earth—planned on catching her—one hefty broad—because she jumps right on me, knocking me flat.

"I don't believe you just did that, Tuna."

She's sprawled across me, breathing hard. This whole scene is so ridiculous I start laughing. Then I try so hard to stop I get the hiccups.

As we come around the corner of my house—I'm hiccuping and Tuna's moaning about the hole in her sweater—this dark shape steps out on the front walk.

Tuna screams. I let out one loud *"Hick!"*

"And what do you two think you're doing?" Cassandra asks. "Never mind, I have a pretty good idea." We follow her into the house.

"Not only does it lead me to believe I can't trust you," my father says at the breakfast table, "but it was a very stupid thing to try."

Tuna and I examine the tablecloth as if we're looking for gold or something.

"You could've slipped and killed yourselves," Dad says. "Or at the very least broken your necks."

There's a short silence and then Cassandra says, "I'm going to call your parents about this, Tuna. Mr. Canfield and I have discussed it and we feel we have to let them know about it. And you are grounded for the next week, Mimi. That means you'll come home right after school. Without friends."

"Wow, but are they strict," Tuna grouses on the way upstairs. "My mother won't care. She'll just tell me not to do it again." She shoves her stuff into her duffel bag. "I can't wait to get home so I can call Dub. He's probably wondering what happened to me last night. It's all your fault, too, Mimi!"

"My fault? What'd I do that you didn't do? I didn't even want to go back to the party."

"You laughed! You always laugh. You're the one who woke them up! You're, like, completely hopeless. Everything's a big, fat joke to you!"

There are actually tears in her eyes as she runs out of my room.

Chapter Four

I stay in my room sort of doing homework, but mostly doodling with my watercolors. At around four, I go out for a walk. Cassandra says that's allowed. My father had his face buried in the *Times* when I left the house.

Sometimes it agitates me that she's the one who says what I can and can't do, which happens fairly often because Dad tunes the world out by reading or doing crosswords. I think he got into this habit of withdrawing while he and Aggie were fighting a lot.

Everyone has his own way of dealing with trouble, I guess, or grief or anger or whatever. I know I use laughter. I think Cassandra uses a super calm exterior. She probably had to develop that calm of hers while she was a social worker. She told me once she came across an awful lot of suffering in her job.

Boy, it seems as if life is one trade-off after another. I mean, I know Dad's a lot happier now. He smiles a lot more. And he and I don't have to hassle constantly about clean laundry and grocery shopping because Cassandra manages most of that now, though I help out. But on the other hand now there's this woman who isn't my mother living in this house and telling me what to do.

It's a crummy, rainy day, a good day to wallow in self-pity. I cross the street to Harriet's. Harriet Guthrie is this fairly famous sculptor who lives in a beautiful old white house across the street from us. Her work is in several museums, including the Metropolitan in New York.

I called her a sculptress once, years ago before I knew any better. Harriet practically took my head off. She said the word *sculptress* is an abomination. Believe me, I haven't made the same mistake twice. Harriet calls herself a tough cookie and it's the truth.

We've been friends since my cat Scratchy ran away to her house. After three months of dragging that wimp back across the street, I gave up. I mean, who needs rejection by a cat?

I am nothing if not accepting of life's little insults.

There is one thing I'll never forgive Scratchy for, though, even if he did kick the bucket last year. He never once scratched Harriet while he spent most of the time he was mine trying to maul me to death—or at least, scar me for life.

Harriet's as old as the hills. That's another thing she says about herself, only from the way she says it you know she wants you to talk her out of it. Her face is covered with tiny lines and wrinkles and she cuts her gunmetal-gray hair with a nail scissors. The effect is original, to say the least. My father is fond of saying that Harriet looks like an escaped lunatic.

There are two things Harriet almost always wears: false eyelashes and leopard spots. She has leopard-spotted smocks, a leopard coat, leopard-spotted scarves, nightgown, umbrella, and underwear. She doesn't wear leopard spots on fancy occasions, though. When Harriet dresses up she wears a genuine black satin Japanese kimono. It was a present from Teruko Hanayagi, who was her best friend. He died two months ago and Harriet hasn't smiled much since. I figure she really needs me now—to cheer her up and everything.

Being grounded, I don't dare go on Harriet's property, so I walk along the outside of her enormous, perfectly groomed hedge, whistling as loudly as I can. If I know Harriet, she's either working in her studio out in the barn or she's walking around her "grounds," which is what she calls her two acres.

All of a sudden, this rake handle shoots through the hedge in front of me, missing my stomach by inches.

"Who's there?" Harriet demands.

"It's me—Mimi." I sound as if I'm practicing a musical scale, for Pete's sake.

"That's what I suspected. Why don't you come up the driveway and why are you whistling off-key like that?"

"I'm grounded. I'm not allowed to go anywhere for a week."

"Tsk, tsk. Well, I'm sure you deserve it. I want to talk to you, Mimi, about a job. Do you think you could come in for that?"

"Oh, yeah. Dad loves me to earn my own money."

"Well, then come in. I'm beginning to feel like a fool talking to the shrubbery." Her loud laugh rings out as I walk down toward the driveway and sends Scratchy II flying through the hedge.

"You broke your arm! You've got a cast!" I point at her right arm.

"Has anyone ever told you you have a penchant for stating the obvious?" Harriet reveals her perfect, still-white teeth. She uses dental floss every night of her life. "And don't point. It's not polite. I broke my wrist. Fell off the ladder. And I do *not*"—she holds up her good hand as I open my mouth—"want to hear one word about how a woman my age shouldn't be climbing around on ladders. How else does old maid Schwartz think a sculptor works unless it's with a ladder?"

"Dr. Schwartz is married and the father of four," I say, following her up the driveway.

"He's still an old maid," Harriet says with a snap of her teeth.

"Here, let me." I put my shoulder to the barn door, which is hard to open, and push. For once it slides back easily and I land in the dirt. Harriet steps over me into the barn.

"Delays, delays . . . I wonder if I'll ever finish her," she murmurs, walking around the marble statue she's been working on for almost four years now.

The statue is a seven-foot female nude with its arms outstretched and its head thrown back. The marble hair spills down the back. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

"God, I wish I looked like her. Does the model really look that good or did you, you know, improve her?"

Harriet makes a sound through her teeth and looks at me fiercely. "I always strive for the truth, Mimi. Any serious artist does. Though I have to admit I would never immortalize flab or an appendicitis scar. There's enough ugliness in the world, if you ask me. She is magnificent, isn't she?" She smiles lovingly at her work.

I always find myself wishing the scaffolding weren't there so I could touch the surface—it's so smooth.

Harriet plucks at her short, ragged hair and stares at the statue. "I never thought my own work would

. . . mock me," she says quietly as if to herself. "She reminds me all too clearly that I've come to the end of a season."

I'd like to ask her what she's talking about, but Harriet's extremely impatient with stupidity.

"That's a line from one of Robert Frost's poems, Mimi." Then, she recites:

> Ah, when to the heart of man
> Was it ever less than a treason
> To go with the drift of things,
> To yield with a grace to reason,
> And bow and accept the end
> Of a love or a season?

The silence goes on until I cough, saying, "If I know you, Harriet, you'll be back on that ladder working in no time, no time at all."

"We'll see," she says crisply and walks out of the barn.

As we walk down the driveway, Harriet stops suddenly. "You've forgotten about the job. That's why you're here. This wasn't supposed to be a social visit, Mimi. I don't want to lock horns with your father, after all. Ask him if you can do a little cooking and light cleaning for me. Schwartz says it'll take a minimum of eight weeks for this thing"—she waves her broken wrist angrily—"to heal. I'll pay you two fifty an hour. That's if you're willing, of course." She peers out from under her bangs at me.

"God, I'd love it. It'll make the next week especially go faster. Plus, I can always use the money. Every time I hit my father up for some cash for the basics like paints and stuff he asks how come I don't take up a hobby that doesn't cost anything."

"And what do you answer?"

"Like what? It gets him every time." We laugh together. "He usually does give me the money. He's not so bad."

Harriet sniffs doubtfully and walks up the porch stairs.

"Now," she says once we're in the kitchen, "I'll want you to prepare something for my dinner every night. The only thing I've been able to manage with this thing on my arm is scrambled eggs. Ugh. I don't even like eggs and I'm getting plenty tired of them, let me tell you. Schwartz had a hissy when I told him I've lived on Metrecal soups for years. He said I have to eat more eggs and"— she makes a face—"red meat. Ugh."

"I didn't know Metrecal made soups."

"Well, they do and they're not bad. How else do you think a woman my age keeps her weight down?"

"I see you've got some hamburger in here." I rummage through the refrigerator. "I'll make you a meat loaf for tonight. No charge. Who's going to the grocery store for you?"

"I'm having things delivered from Day Brothers market. Thank God some people still offer service."

Once I've gotten the meat loaf into the oven, I head through the hall to the front door and Scratchy II dives at my ankles. The pink satin Victorian couch in the living room is his hideout.

I pull him off, saying, "Attack Cat strikes again," and hand him to Harriet, who smiles proudly at the little mutt.

Never mind that he's a cat—to my mind, he's a mutt.

"You should put up a sign warning people about him," I tell her and her laugh follows me all the way back across the street.

In spite of the broken wrist and that stuff about the end of a season, it's nice to know Harriet's as peppery as ever. Nothing can change that.

At dinner, I tell Dad and Cassandra about my job offer. All Dad says is, "I'm surprised she lets you put your big toe on her precious driveway."

Generally my father is not a sour man. But Harriet is one of the few people (my mother's another one) who brings out the worst in him.

"David," Cassandra says, "you bring up that driveway incident every time Mimi mentions Harriet Guthrie. Don't you think it's time to let bygones be bygones?"

Cassandra's talking about something that happened ages ago, not too long after Aggie left, in fact. Some people came over to visit my father one night and when they left, they turned their car around in

Harriet's driveway. Harriet was into mourning doves at the time. She fed them every day and was afraid some one might run over one of those dumb, fat birds that were always squatting around in her driveway.

Well, she called my father up that night and yelled that his friends were the only ones rude enough to turn around in her driveway. Dad got furious. He got mad a lot in those days. Probably because he was pretty worried about me and he had to do a lot of housework when he got home at night. I mean, we had this lady who came in every afternoon to do some cleaning and start dinner, but Dad and I still had to work hard to keep things going.

I remember him always telling me during those days that I had to be strong, that I couldn't let what Aggie had done ruin my life. He used to say that he and I couldn't afford the luxury of self-pity. We had to make our own happiness no matter what Aggie did.

But anyway, his temper was pretty short in those days, not like now. So he yelled back at Harriet and told her she ought to put a sign up if she didn't want people turning around in her driveway.

There's been a large yellow sign with black letters saying POSITIVELY NO TURNING IN THIS DRIVEWAY in front of Harriet's hedge ever since. My father has never forgiven her for it.

People fight about the dumbest things.

Meanwhile, Cassandra's still waiting for Dad to answer her, but he's pretending he hasn't heard the

question. He just keeps turning his wineglass around and around as if the red Burgundy is just fascinating. Cassandra and I exchange looks.

"I think," she says slowly, "as long as Mimi would be helping someone as well as earning money, that her punishment shouldn't extend to going over to Miss Guthrie's every day. Don't you agree, David?"

"Humph."

Cassandra keeps the serious expression on her face, but when she looks at me, I notice the tiny crinkles around her eyes. She's trying not to laugh, but we both know Dad's *humph* means it's okay.

Later, on my way into the kitchen, I overhear Dad and Cassandra talking. "I think it's fine," Dad's saying. "It's not as if she'll be out palling around with her friends. . . ."

Sigh. This stepparent stuff is difficult sometimes. I mean, one minute I appreciate Cassandra because she helps me out with Dad, and the next minute I resent her. If there's one thing I really hate it's hearing my father refer to me as "she" . . . especially when he's talking to *her* about me.

Chapter Five

"Dub called last night," Tuna says as we trudge up the hill. The school bus rounds the bend ahead of us and I break into a run as she adds, "He said we missed —Wait up, Mimi! He said we missed the . . . party of the . . . year."

"How does he know?" I ask over my shoulder as I push my way to the back of the bus. Jerry Striggles sticks his foot out, but I step over it just in time. I notice he doesn't pull that old trick on Tuna, who practically breaks all my ribs scrunching me up against the window as she sits next to me.

When I get my breath, I ask, "Has Dub been to every party given by every kid at Hugh McNally this year?"

"You know what I mean," Tuna says. "Don't be so liberal."

"Tuna . . . you mean literal, don't you?"

"Yuh, don't be so literal about everything. Dub says Curt's party really got, like, intense after we left." She lowers her voice, saying, "Two guys threw up, and Headlight Hansen got into a fight over . . ." She glances around furtively. "You're not going to believe this, Meem. . . . He got into a fight over Candy Pine."

"No!"

"Yuh."

"God. Who'd fight over that blubber bod?" I laugh. Candy Pine is this extremely intelligent, fat person in the Junior Class. I know her because she's the editor in chief of the *Viewpoint*, our school paper. She never lets me forget that I'm a lowly assistant editor.

"Holy moly, Tuna. What happened?"

"Well"—Tuna licks her tiny lips—"Dub says Headlight and Candy were making out down in the laundry room. I guess they were, like, really getting it on. . . ."

"What were they getting on? The Walls' dirty clothes?" Tuna jabs me in the ribs. "Ow. Okay, I'm sorry. Go on."

"Well, Dub says they were really getting into it when Bobo Johnson comes in. He's had this crush on Candy forever, you know." I shake my head. "Well, you must be the only one who doesn't know! Like, sometimes I wonder if you and I go to the same school

or what. Honest, Mimi"—Tuna shakes her head in disgust—"get with it, will you?

"So, anyway, Bobo comes in and finds them and, like, goes berserk! Starts yelling and casting excursions on Headlight's name. . . . Mimi, I am *not* going to tell you these things unless you quit laughing at everything I say."

"Tuna—y-you mean casting *aspersions,* meaning *insults,* d-don't you?"

"Oh, yuh, I guess that's what Dub called it. Something like that." Tucking a blond curl behind an ear, she goes on. "So, I guess Headlight and Candy were practically *doing* it right there on the laundry-room floor. . . ."

"That sounds comfortable."

Tuna gives me a look and I shut my mouth. "Dub says Candy was out of her mind drunk. Bobo's been her only friend for ages. I guess he thought he should protect her or something."

"God. What's Candy Pine got that I haven't got?"

"About sixty pounds," Tuna says, cracking us up.

"But seriously, Tuna, how come she's got two guys chasing her? Though she's not bad-looking. Even with all that extra weight."

"Dub says . . ."

"That's becoming a key phrase of yours, Tuna."

"Well"—she shoots me a reproachful look—"he says Candy'd be a knockout if she'd lose some weight.

She does have pretty hair, though that white blond has to come from the bottle. And I think those big blue-tinted glasses she wears are cool, don't you, Meem?"

"I guess. I've heard Lars say that gap between her front teeth is sensual. Boys think the weirdest—"

I don't have time to finish this statement because the bus comes to this screeching halt. I think the driver does it on purpose to see how many of us he can pick off.

If I had buck teeth, I would've put a two-inch hole through the back of the guy's head in front of me. As it is, I get this extremely dirty look from him and a split upper lip.

"Wow, Mimi," Tuna hisses behind her hand as we run up the front steps into school, "do something about that blood, will you? You're, like, dripping all over the place!"

She leaves me at the nurse's office. By the time old Horny Dike (her real name is Nurse Thorndike) gets done with me a half hour later, I have a white adhesive mustache that does nothing for me. As if anything would. Naturally, my lip swells up like a beach ball. By lunchtime I can barely talk, much less eat.

"Hiya, Canfield." Lars saunters up to Tuna's and my table. "What happened to the kid?"

"Oh, I had a little accident on—"

"She smashed into somebody sitting in front of her on the bus," Tuna says.

She's real helpful sometimes.

"Wow"—Tuna rolls her brown eyes—"but only Mimi could do something like that. You should've been there!" She and Lars are practically hysterical over it.

"Canfield, you're a riot. You really slay me!" Lars gives my shoulder a playful push.

I smile with my eyes, being the good sport that I am. I'd use my mouth, but under the circumstances it's a bit difficult. Then Bobo and Jerry Striggles come over and Lars tells them the story. Pretty soon it seems as if everyone in the cafeteria is getting a real bang out of Klutzy Canfield's latest caper.

I love how everyone thinks an injury is funny—when it doesn't happen to be theirs.

But when I get home from school and Cassandra asks what happened, I'm right there, like all my friends, making a big joke out of it.

"I'm such a klutz!" I say like I'm proud of it. "There I was knocked almost unconscious while Tuna's books slid off her lap and all these boys were practically killing themselves trying to pick them up for her . . . ha, ha, ha. It was so *funny*." For some reason, my nose is running so I bomb upstairs for a Kleenex.

When I come back down, Cassandra says, "Do you handle everything that goes wrong this way, Mimi?"

"What? What way?"

"By making a joke out of something that hurts you." Her hazel eyes absolutely bore into my blue ones. So

I laugh. Then I go out to the kitchen for a snack before going over to Harriet's.

On my way back through the dining room Cassandra looks up from her typewriter again, saying, "I almost forgot to tell you—there's a letter for you. From your mother."

"Oh, boy. Here it comes. Aggie only writes when there's some kind of disaster to report. The last time she wrote was because some guy she liked married another woman. She wanted my sympathy. Can you believe it?"

Cassandra looks at me for a moment, then says, "Everyone needs sympathy. Maybe you were the only one she had to confide in."

I shrug and rip open the envelope. Aggie writes:

Dear Mimi,

How are you??? I haven't heard from you since you-know-who remarried. Are you all right?? Does she make you scrub floors? Ha, ha, only kidding.

Seriously, your mother is working like a dog. I haven't stopped since I completed that film I mentioned the last time I talked to you. *Coppers* it's called. Sherman, you've heard me talk about him, haven't you? He's my agent and a very close friend and he says *Coppers* will be a smash. It's

being released in the East sometime next month. Send me copies of reviews, will you, babes?

I miss you bunches. It's been—my God—two years, hasn't it? I'm definitely coming to New York next month. We'll celebrate your birthday together, okay? See, I didn't forget. See you then.

XXXXXXXXX's,
Aggie

"What does she say?"

"That she's coming East, the usual. You can read it." I toss the letter down on the table and head out the door.

I wonder as I cross the street to Harriet's if I'm some weirdo because I don't care very much about Aggie. What little I do feel for her borders on dislike. She's always saying she's going to come see me and that we're going to do all these marvelous things together. Nothing ever comes off. I don't believe her anymore.

To tell the truth, it's been easier since Dad got married again. Divorce and a stepmother are a lot more normal these days than having parents who are married but who live three thousand miles apart. I mean, *that's* tough to explain to people.

At the time Aggie took off, there was a bunch of kids in the neighborhood who got their jollies from teasing me, as if it was my fault that Aggie couldn't

hack motherhood. I hated those kids. But I never let them see it. I just laughed when they called me an orphan. I just turned it into a big joke. Eventually they got tired of razzing me and left me alone.

When Harriet opens the door, she makes a sound like, "Eeeeh!" Then she says, "You were attacked. Oh, I read outrageous things about our public schools today. Tsk, tsk. I hope you fought back."

I get a laugh out of that. She actually looks disappointed when I tell her what really happened.

Harriet is sporting a purple smock over a pair of leopard-spotted slacks. The smock is cinched at the waist with what looks like an old piece of rope. On closer inspection, I realize it *is* an old piece of rope. She's also wearing a pink straw hat that rises to a high, skinny peak, sort of like a coolie hat. Harriet is a sight for sore eyes.

"Hey, I like your purple smock," I tell her as I follow her out to the kitchen.

"It isn't purple, it's plum, and you'll be seeing a lot of this one. It's the only one I have that doesn't button up the back. I can just manage to put on my eyelashes, but I don't care enough about what I wear to fight with buttons in the back.

"I see you're eyeing my hat. Well, I don't wear one indoors as a rule, but I did not feel up to calling a taxi to go to the hairdresser's today. It's times like this I badly miss old Teruko. I could always depend on

him . . ." Her voice trails off. Then, shaking herself slightly, Harriet says, "Yes, I understand what goes on in public schools today is not to be believed. So few people have self-discipline these days, that's the root of the problem!" She waves her cast in the air.

Then Harriet plops a pot roast down on the table. "Do you know what to do with one of these? Good, because I haven't the faintest. How I yearn for some Metrecal split pea," she says wistfully.

I am just closing the refrigerator door, having found a potato with three-inch eyes and a few wrinkled carrots to go with the pot roast, when she mentions the split-pea soup. Without thinking, I make a face.

"Believe me, Mimi!" Harriet jabs the air with her cast. "Discipline! Keeping your weight down! Discipline is the only way to a satisfying life, Mimi. Remember that. Are you still painting?" she asks suddenly.

"Sort of." I peel a carrot and throw it into the casserole dish. "I haven't done a whole lot lately. I've been really busy."

"That's just what I'm talking about," Harriet says. "You have to work at your craft. How else will you learn it?" She stops pacing around the kitchen table abruptly and says, "I am running on, aren't I? Sorry, Mimi. It's just that I'm going stir crazy not being able to work. There's no reason for me to get out of bed in the morning. Do you know what that's like?"

I'm standing here trying to think of something to say to make her feel better when she turns and goes out the back door.

Once I get the pot roast into the oven, I vacuum the living room and bedroom. Then I go out to the barn, where I find Harriet standing in front of her statue. I don't think she hears me say good-bye. She doesn't turn around.

"Your stepmother tells me you had a letter from your mother today," Dad says after dinner. "What's she got to say for herself?" He shakes the newspaper out and pretends to read it though I know he's very interested in the letter.

So I say, "Not much," using the same casual tone. Dad and I play this little game that there are no hard feelings toward Aggie. From my position on the living-room floor, I watch him and Cassandra practically cuddling on the peach-colored love seat.

Putting his newspaper down, Dad says, "Would you say from her posture, Cassie, that she's trying to tell me she's not in the best of humor tonight?" He looks over his glasses at Cassandra.

"Don't tease her, David. I don't think Mimi's had a very good day. Tell your father what your mother said about coming to New York next month, Mimi."

"You just told him."

There's a silence. Then Dad says, "Well—sounds like fun," in that same extremely noncommittal voice he uses when he talks about Aggie.

"Oh, yeah. About as much fun as the last three times she was coming to see me."

He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes in a tired way. Then he says, "Your mother doesn't live an ordinary life, Mimi. Your mother is a successful—"

"She's *my* mother." I stand up. "You don't have to explain her to me."

As I go upstairs to my room, I hear Dad saying, "She sure is touchy, isn't she?"

Chapter Six

One thing I'm definitely good at is putting on a good front. I mean, even though it's been mortifying to go to school every day with this bandage on my upper lip, no one—not even Tuna—guesses that all the funny cracks about it bother me. Take what happened to me yesterday, Thursday.

It was between fifth and sixth period. I have study hall sixth period, but I don't go to it. I'm a pretty good student and the aides could care less if the good kids don't show. They have enough to do trying to keep track of all the maniacs in this school without worrying about honor students. There's something to be said for having a good rep.

So there it was, two o'clock in the afternoon. Tuna

and I were headed outdoors. She was meeting Dub in his Capri. They were going for a little sin—I mean spin—and I was going to hang around with her until Dubby showed up. But Lars came down the hall looking more beautiful than usual.

He had on a short-sleeved rugby shirt and these tight jeans, and when he took my arm, I didn't fight it. We went down this short flight of stairs to a cubbyhole under the staircase in the south wing and he kissed me. Or tried to, anyway.

I mean, I tried not to complain, but it's difficult making out with an extremely sore and bandaged upper lip. I didn't blame Lars for getting disgusted, especially after I dropped my purse and then all my books and notebooks.

God. Here it is Friday noon, and I'm *still* reliving that moment.

Tuna plunks down her lunch tray across from me. "I'm *starving*. Mimi," she breaks into my thoughts, "you've got the weirdest expression on your face. It's sort of like a . . . cringe. What're you thinking about?" She bites into her hamburger. Friday is hamburger day at McNally High and the only day we always buy lunch. The other four days could kill you.

"Wow, but am I glad your punishment is over tomorrow." Tuna rolls her big brown eyes. "I've, like, really missed you this week. I've gone home to an empty house every day. If it hadn't been for Dub call-

ing me every night"—this time she rolls her eyes in a spasm of passion (I think)—"I would've died. It's been one whole week, Meem."

"A whole week since what?"

"Since we, you know . . . did it. And Dub says he is just *burning*."

"So give him a fire extinguisher." This cracks me up.

"No, Meem," she says in all seriousness, "I think he means he's burning with . . . desire." She flicks her tongue over her lips. "But it's all right because tonight—"

Ron Pease goes by, giving my hair a playful tug.

"You stick your finger in an electric socket or what, Canfield? Hah-ha. Your hair's really *crazy*. Hah-ha!" Ron follows everything he says with this maniacal laugh that always makes me wonder about the state of his mental health.

Still, I smile at Ron as wide as I can without splitting the scab on my upper lip. After that fiasco with Lars yesterday, I took the bandage off. I'm not taking any chances. My mouth has to heal fast before Lars gives up forever.

"You're not listening to me again, Mimi. Wow, I like how you never listen to me and Ron doesn't bother to say hello to me." Tuna sticks out her little lower lip before remembering about her date tonight.

"So, we're going over to Dub's house for the whole

night. His parents will be out and—oooh—it gives me shivers just thinking about it, Meem. I'm really crazy about him. Really."

"Yeah, that's what you keep telling me, Tuna."

"Hey, you know the plots of any movies playing now?" Tuna asks suddenly.

I shake my head. "Why?"

She giggles, rolling her big eyes. "Well, I told my parents Dub and me are going to a movie, and just in case they ask me what we saw or something, I better have a plot ready to talk about. . . ."

"Hiya, Mimi!" Headlight Hansen bellows across six tables. I wave back and pray that he'll stay down there.

"Don't bother saying hello to me, Headlight," Tuna calls. "Wow, what is it with all these guys today? Do I have bad breath or something?"

"Listen, dummy, unless you want Headlight over here bothering us, just don't encourage him."

"Don't sweat it, Mimi." She rolls her eyes in Headlight's direction and smiles slightly. "Haven't you noticed who he's sitting with?"

I look. He's sitting next to Candy Pine, who is sporting her usual uniform, a denim tent.

"Oh, come on, Tuna. You're not *serious* about those two. I thought you were pulling my leg. You're kidding, aren't you?"

Shaking her head, Tuna says, "No, hon," as if she's talking to some wimp in diapers. "Dub says Head-

light's been bragging about what a hot number Candy is." She giggles into her hand.

I choke, spraying milk all over the table. "God, I can't believe—ouch!" Tuna whacks me in the shin as Candy sits down next to me.

"Uh, hi, Candy."

"'Lo, Mimi, Fortuna." Candy knows as well as everyone else that Tuna hates her full name. "I wanted to remind you, Mimi, about the *Viewpoint* meeting this afternoon. I don't usually need you, but today we're voting on next year's staff. I can depend on your vote, can't I? *You* certainly don't want to be editor in chief."

"Who can resist a pitch like this?" I ask Tuna, who laughs.

"Well, everyone knows the paper has improved under my tutelage. . . . That means guidance, Fortuna," Candy says with a smirk. "I wanted to make sure you'd show up, Mimi."

"Yeah, I'll be there. I don't have anything better to do."

"Oh, yes, that's right." Candy stands up. She smiles again, revealing the space between her front teeth. You can't see her eyes behind the blue lenses. "I forgot . . . Fortuna's the one with the steady, isn't she? She's the one with, ah, something to *do* after school every day. And have I been hearing stories about what she does!" Laughing, Candy delivers a parting shot. "Well,

don't give up hope, Mimi. Someday, who knows, maybe it'll happen to you."

"If it can happen to you, it can happen to any—!" Tuna says angrily to Candy's back.

I stop her, saying, "Don't lower yourself."

"Wow! I can't believe her. And you sat there and took it. She's a real . . . a real . . ."

"Nasty person?"

"I was thinking of something a little stronger," Tuna says and we smile at each other.

As we're leaving the cafeteria, this arm grabs me from behind. Of course, I make this extremely cool sound like, "Awwk! Oh, hi, L-Lars." Forcing a laugh, I try to conceal the fact that I am in *pain*. Gingerly I touch my neck. Well, nothing seems to be broken.

"How are ya, Scarface?" He grins broadly. "See you finally got rid of that bandage. Another week and you'll be ready for action, right, Canfield?" He nudges me in the ribs, moving me six inches to the left.

Why are people so rough on me? I mean, what am I doing wrong?

Lars has turned his boyish charm on Tuna, who is batting her beautiful brown eyes and giggling like crazy. "Hi, you lovely thing, you," he says to my absolutely best friend. "Listen, you ever get bored with W. Robert, give me a call, okay?" He winks, flashes another smile, and takes off down the hall.

"Wow, he's cute." Tuna stares after him. "I could

really go for him . . . if it weren't for you and Dub." She laughs nervously. "Dub's wonderful, Meem. Really he is. I'm crazy about him."

"Uh-huh," I say.

After school, Harriet gives me another lecture about pursuing my interest in art. So before going to bed, I drag my easel out of the closet and set it up in front of my mirror. I'm going to do a self-portrait *avec* soup can, which I've already attached to my head. It's been humid as anything lately.

I make my hair redder than it actually is and my eyes and chin even more prominent. This, along with the soup can, gets me laughing so hard that Dad comes in to see what's going on.

He looks at the sketches I've done and says, "That doesn't really look much like you, you know."

"You knew it was me, didn't you?" I laugh.

"Only because of the Campbell's, Mimi. Otherwise, I'd think it was a caricature of your mother."

So much for self-portraits.

Chapter Seven

On Saturday, after doing my thing for Harriet, I go over to Tuna's. I can tell immediately she's all worked up about something.

"Oh, wow, but you won't believe what Dub told me last night. It was about . . . you." She rolls her eyes at the ceiling. "It was something Lars said."

"Really? Tell me!" I jump on her bed, making her bobble up and down.

"Well"—she licks her lips—"Dub says that Lars thinks . . ." She smiles, teasing me.

"God, you're killing me. Tell me before I have a heart attack!"

"Lars thinks . . . you're a really . . . nice girl. There. Isn't that great?"

"Did Lars also mention that all the other girls like me and I make all my own clothes?"

"Hunh? What are you talking about? You're weird sometimes, Mimi."

"Okay, I'm sorry. But I think maybe I would've been happier if Lars'd said I make his blood boil or something more along those lines."

"Meem," Tuna says, a deeply sincere expression on her face, "you know what I've been trying to tell you. You, like, don't act like you want a *serious* relationship."

"I don't?"

"No. Really." She tucks her curly blond hair behind her ears and goes on, "You act like one of the boys, Meem. Oh, wow, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but they all kid around with you like you're one of them."

"Yeah." I sigh. "I guess it's true. God, I'm hopeless."

"Lars said something else, too. He wants to double-date with Dub and me tonight."

"What? You mean with me?"

"Yuh. He asked Dub to ask me to tell you. See? He's asking you out—that's a good sign. Tonight's your chance to act, you know, more sexy."

"I've never been asked out like this before," I tell her. "Through two other people. Somehow it's not what I was hoping for."

"Wow, Meem. You sure are hard to please." Tuna's shaking her head at me when her mother pops in.

"Oh, hello, Mimi. I didn't hear you come in. How are you, dear? How're your parents? Er, your father?"

"Hi, Mrs. McElliott. Dad's fine. So's Cassandra."

"Well, good!" Mrs. McElliott says as if I've just announced I've made the National Honor Society or something. Mrs. McElliott frequently acts super excited about nothing in particular.

"Fortuna, sweetie, I just wanted to check with you on your plans tonight because Daddy and I are going to a skeet-shooting party in Weston. We might even spend the night depending on how good a party it is." Her tinkling laugh fills the room. "Were you going out this evening, sweetie?"

"Yuh. Dub and I are going to do something. I don't know what yet."

"Oh, good. He's an awfully nice boy, don't you think, Mimi?"

"Oh, yeah, really awfully."

"Yes. Mr. McElliott and I are very pleased for Fortuna. Of course she's *so* pretty and sweet looking."

Tuna looks as if she'd like to jump out the window.

"So! What did you say your plans were, Fortuna?"

"I said I didn't know yet, Mother."

"Well, I know I can depend on you to use your head. Have a nice time. It was nice talking to you, Mimi."

"You, too, Mrs. McElliott," I call as she rushes out of the room. "God. Your mother thinks you can do no wrong."

"Yuh, I know." Tuna sounds glum. "She's that way about Brink, too. In my mother's eyes we're, like, perfect."

"Yeah, must be great having so much freedom."

"Yuh, great."

"So, anyway, it looks as if I have a date tonight. What exciting activity do we have planned? I have to tell my father."

"As long as my parents are going out, Dub wants to come over here."

"Over here? Oh, well, okay. Invite a couple of kids and we'll have a party."

"No, I don't think that's what Dub wants. He said he wants to spend the evening just . . . with me."

"Oh. Just the four of us, huh?"

"Yuh. Dub's very . . . romantic. He's also saving his money for this really expensive water ski he wants." Tuna picks her toenails.

"Well . . . it'll be fun. I guess."

Some date. I end up walking over to Tuna's by myself. If this is a date, I'm a Fig Newton.

Dubby and Lars are sitting on the living-room couch when I arrive.

"Hi there, Canfield," the man of my dreams greets me. He waves a beer can over his head, saying, "Get yourself a beer and come on over here."

So I go downstairs to the kitchen. The McElliotts'

house isn't large, but it has four levels, so you're constantly running up and down stairs.

As I'm coming back up to the second level, where the living room is, I hear Dub saying in this important tone of voice, "And my second goal, which as you all know I've accomplished, was to be elected president of the Senior Class. . . ." He takes a swig of beer. "Then"—he cups the can between both hands and stares intently at it—"once I'd accomplished that, I set a third goal for myself."

"What was that, Dubby?" Tuna throws me a See-isn't-he-wonderful look.

"My third goal was to be accepted at Harvard, Brown, or Yale."

"Neat schools," I offer.

"I'm not interested in them because they're neat," Dub says in this extremely cold way.

Tossing down the last of his beer, Lars stands up. "So, where you going to college, pal?"

"Unfortunately"—Dub looks embarrassed, but only slightly—"that was the one goal I didn't reach. The only place I was accepted was U Conn. But I'm planning on transferring after the first semester," he adds quickly. "My dad's got connections. Biggies," he says with a significant nod at Tuna, who smiles proudly.

I'm wondering if this is how this whole night is going to go—having old Dub inform us peons about

his future plans—when Lars puts an album on the stereo and asks me to dance. The first side has finished before I realize we're alone in the room.

Lars sits down on the couch, saying, "C'mere, Canfield . . . I've got something special for you . . . Acapulco Gold." He pats his breast pocket.

"I've, uh, never smoked before, Lars."

"You haven't?" He laughs. "Man, that's unbelievable. You'll love this stuff, kid. Here"—he lights a joint and inhales deeply—"just do what I do."

So I do. And it's no big thrill. We finish the first joint and then he gives me one of my own. Actually it tastes lousy, but as usual I go along with the gag.

After a while, Lars says, "I hear this stuff is a terrific aphrodisiac."

"Really? You know what I read once?" He sidles up next to me on the couch, but I've just got to tell him this neat thing. "I read, I don't remember where anymore, but it was about aphro—"

He kisses me then and I kiss him back.

"Lars?" I pull away from him so quickly his head hits my shoulder.

"Hey! Jeez, Canfield . . ."

"Sorry . . . but I've got to tell you. Did you know that the ancient Greeks thought that the filip . . . Hmm, what was that thing called?"

"I don't care, Canfield. . . . Come on, will ya?"

"The philit . . . No, that wasn't it, either." Just as his lips touch mine again, I remember it.

"The philtrum!" I yell.

"Wha—? What the heck are you talking about, Canfield?"

"The philtrum! That's that little dent between your upper lip and your nose. That thing—right there!" I jab his philtrum and he looks shocked out of his mind. "I read that if you tickle that little dent, it's an aphrodisiac!"

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah! Here, let me try it . . ."

He grabs my hand away and kisses me—extremely passionately. It goes on for what seems like hours—until I can't feel his lips anymore. Maybe my mouth has fallen asleep.

"Oh, man, Canfield . . . I love this sweater you're wearing," Lars whispers in my ear. "Ummm, it's so soft. . . ." He runs his hand up and down my arm and I think: What a weirdo. He's getting off on an angora sweater.

"Ummm, let's do it again. . . ." Lars starts kissing me.

I'm trying to keep my mind on him and his kisses and all, but I find myself thinking that I can't just sit here kissing him all night. I'm hungry! I've got a lot of energy! I want to *do* something!

So I jump up suddenly and Lars makes a noise. He's holding his eye. He's saying, "Jesus, Canfield, you almost knocked my eye out!"

What is he talking about? For some reason the ex-

pression on his face strikes me as terrifically funny and I'm hysterical as I follow him down to the kitchen. Lars searches around until he finds a dish towel. He puts ice cubes into the towel while I go through the McElliotts' refrigerator.

He sits at the kitchen table with this wiped-out expression on his face; his right eye seems to be turning black and blue. I eat some cottage cheese, a piece of cake, a glass of milk, and a peanut butter and dill pickle sandwich. Then I realize something. Lars is trying to . . . I think maybe he's . . . taking *notes* on my behavior.

Oh, my *God*. He's a narc. He could be a narc. So I get cagey. I try to catch Lars in the actual act of jotting down notes about me. But he's too fast for me. I never *see* the pad of paper or the pencil. But no matter, I *know* he's trying to take notes.

Holy crud, I've got to get out of here! I bomb upstairs, screaming for Tuna. Lars follows me, yelling something that I don't stop to listen to.

I can't find Tuna on the second level so I run up another flight of stairs to her room and pound on the door. It's locked. I'm yelling, "He's a narc! He's a narc!" and pounding on the door.

Finally Dub comes running out of there in his shirt and Jockey shorts. There's a look of complete terror on his face. Clutching her bathrobe around her, Tuna

appears in the doorway behind him. Her curly hair looks as if it's been attacked by an eggbeater.

"What's the matter with her?" Dub yells at Lars, who's still holding the ice pack to his eye. "What'd you do to her, Petronelli? She's gone crazy!"

Dub is really beside himself. Boy, I thought he had more cool than this.

"I didn't do nothing, man," Lars says.

I didn't do nothing? What kind of grammar is that? This strikes me as uproariously funny and I get laughing so hard I have to sit down on the stairs outside Tuna's room. Tuna starts giggling, too, and sits beside me.

I say, "Look at the pattern in this wallpaper, Tuna. It's really extremely freaky. I'm surprised at your mother, putting up a freaky geometric like this in a hall."

"Freaky? Do you really think so?" Tuna crooks her head and stares at the wallpaper. "Hmm. I'll have to tell her you said so."

"She's out of her mind," Lars says over Tuna's and my heads.

"Well, it's your fault," Dub says. "Now what are we going to do with her?"

"She only had a joint and a half," Lars whines. "How was I supposed to know she was going to turn into a fruitcake on grass, man? Hey, Tuna, be a good

kid and take your freaked-out friend to the bathroom or something, will ya?"

Tuna grabs my arm, trying to get me to stand up, but I'm still into the wallpaper. I make myself as heavy as possible.

I think heavy, I act heavy, I am heavy.

"I was only trying to loosen her up a little," Lars is still whining. "Jesus, what a disaster. She wouldn't stop blabbing, then she goes on an eating binge. She really cleaned you out, Tuna. Then she gets paranoid and starts running around like a nut screaming that I'm a narc— Hey! Don't you start, too, man!"

I look up to see Dub and Tuna laughing so hard that tears are running down their cheeks. They're holding on to one another. I don't know what the joke is, but I laugh, too. Lars seems to be the only one with no sense of humor. I'm extremely disappointed in him. . . .

He's picking me up. Lars has picked me up and is carrying me somewhere—down to the kitchen. He's saying I have to drink coffee. He won't let me touch his black eye. How'd he get that, anyway? God. Maybe Lars is the violent type. I'd better watch my step around him, boy.

I ease the front door closed and creep up the stairs, but Dad hears me and comes to the head of the stairs. "Good God!" he yells. "You look as if you've been run over by a truck! What've you been doing? Wrassling

in the backseat with someone? Cassandra! Cassandra! Come look at Mimi!"

My stepmother comes running out of the bathroom, takes one look at me, and says, "Calm down, David. Go to bed. I'll talk to her."

"And what are you on?" Cassandra asks as I pull a nightgown over my head.

"Marijuana?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I guess . . . I'm telling you. I'm sorry. It was a gross experience and you don't have to worry. I won't do it again."

She looks at me for what seems like ages. "I believe you, Mimi. We'll talk more about it in the morning."

"Dad's going to kill me."

"I'll see what I can do," she says, closing my bedroom door.

Chapter Eight

"I was, like, really worried about you last night," Tuna says over the telephone. "Can you . . . talk?"

"Yeah. There's nobody here but me."

"So, what's your punishment this time? How long you grounded for, Meem?"

"I'm not. Cassandra must've done some job with my father because all he said this morning was that he didn't mind if I have a drink at home—on special occasions—but that drugs are out. He said if I ever come home in that condition again he's going to ship me off to a *convent*."

"But, Meem, you're not a Catholic."

"I know, but when my father uses the tone of voice he used, I believe him, let me tell you. I guess this

means I can drink beer at home if I want. Come to think of it, I don't *like* beer."

Tuna's giggling. I don't think she's listened to one word.

"What's so funny, turkey?"

"Oh, Meem, Dub and I've never laughed the way we did at you last night. You were so funny. It gets me every time I think of it."

"Yeah, I guess it was kind of funny. Only I have this horrible feeling that it's the end of a beautiful relationship with Lars."

"He didn't look so mad by the time he left to walk you home. Wow, he sure had some shiner, though."

Monday morning begins with sweet Candy Pine. She corners me in the hall on my way to Algebra.

"It looks as though I'm editor in chief for another year," she says in an almost bored way. "Mrs. DeSantis says the *Viewpoint* has never been better and she should know. She's been the adviser for the past eight years. I don't know how they'll replace me next year. Not that I really care." She smirks and I wonder what she wants from me.

I don't have to wonder long because, looking over her oversized blue lenses, Candy says, "I've, ah, heard about the private party you had over the weekend. Oh, yes, you didn't really think much goes on around here that doesn't get back to someone, did you? Don't be naive, Mimi.

"The rumor mill also claims that Larry, I mean Lars"—she smirks—"has quite a thing for you." She looks me up and down as if she's thinking Maybe I underestimated this one.

"Don't believe everything you hear, Candy," I tell her, hoping a hole will suddenly appear and she'll fall into it.

Smirking again, Candy pushes her face close to mine. "How low does he go?" she asks in a deep voice and chuckles.

Stopping dead in front of the door to my class, I look at her. Somewhere in the back of my mind it registers that she looks as if she's lost some weight. "What did you say?" I ask.

She laughs again, revealing that gap-toothed smile, and says in the same deep voice, "How low does he go?"

"I don't even believe you. You're really—*crude*."

"Oh, come on," Candy laughs, "don't be coy, Mimi. Is the Latin Lover any good or not?"

"It sure as heck isn't any of your business," I say with dignity and turn on my heel to go into the classroom. But Candy has grabbed my arm. I must look like a character in a cartoon: feet and legs making walking motions, but I'm not getting anywhere.

"I understand why you're, ah, attracted to him," Candy's saying. "He has . . . animal appeal. Have you heard about the pool that's going around?" Her hand is still gripping my arm.

There doesn't seem to be any escape from this troll, so I bite. "What pool? You mean swimming pool?"

Again with the gap-toothed smile. "No, Mimi," she says, like I'm not too bright, "it's called the Virgin Pool." She lets that one sink in. "And I hear, from a reliable source"—she smirks—"that you are one of the, ah, virgins they're taking bets on. *Ciao.*" She gives a little ta-ta wave of her pudgy hand and goes off down the hall. Just as the bell rings, I whip into my seat and sigh with relief.

Unfortunately Candy sits at Tuna's and my table at lunch.

"About the pool," she starts as soon as she sits down.

"What pool?" Tuna asks, looking from Candy to me. "Are you on a diet, Candy? You look better. Like you've lost some weight."

Candy stops pushing the lump of cottage cheese around her plate and looks at Tuna coldly. "You haven't heard about it either? No, I suppose you wouldn't have. . . . Everyone knows you've capitulated to Mr. Mann. *Capitulate* means to give in, Fortuna." She smirks at Tuna's blank look.

Then Candy turns back to me. "You aren't the only girl in the pool, Mimi. They're taking bets on plenty of others. It's something like a football pool, Fortuna, only in this pool you bet on the date of . . ." She laughs. ". . . capitulation instead of game scores. Clever, no?"

"No," I say as Headlight comes in. Spotting him

immediately, Candy picks up her tray and goes to sit with him.

"Like, what was she blabbing about?" Tuna asks in a shaken voice.

"She's talking about a contest called the Virgin Pool." I concentrate on eating this stuff they call spaghetti and meatballs. The silence goes on so long that I finally look at her. She looks stunned, as if she might cry.

Even several hours later on the way home in the bus, I can tell Tuna hasn't recovered from Candy's cracks about her and Dub. After trying to make conversation and getting nothing but monosyllabic replies, I quit with the small talk and bring up the subject of the Virgin Pool.

"Okay," I sigh, "I know you're upset. But you shouldn't let someone like Candy get to you—that's what she wants."

"Yuh, I know." Tuna stares out at the ugly Post Road made even uglier by the puddles and dripping skies. "But I think . . . I'm afraid Dub's gone around . . . like, bragging about us, Meem. I don't think I—I could stand that. Do you think he would?" She turns her beautiful brown eyes on me. There are tears in them.

Yeah, I think he would, I say silently. Aloud I say, "I don't know, Tuna. Maybe you'd better talk to him."

"He says he loves me."

"And Dub's nothing if not sincere, right?"

"Yuh . . . but, Meem, how else would anyone . . . know?"

Looking away from her brimming eyes, I shrug. We don't speak for a few miles.

Then Tuna makes my heart stop by saying, "There's something else I'm worried about, Meem. I think I'm—"

"Oh, my God," I breathe. My eyes pop with fear. "Oh, Tuna, please, don't tell me you're, you're . . ."

"Bored."

"Bored?" I yelp, grabbing my heart. "You just took ten years off my life!"

"But, Mimi, you don't understand how terrible this is. Like, I thought, I really, really believed I was in *love* with Dub. And now . . . now, he gives me a royal pain in the . . . well, a pain.

"At first, you know, when I started going out with him, I thought he was so mature, so with it. He knew where he was, like, going in life and everything."

"As he was the first to tell you."

"Yuh. And Daddy liked him and said he had a good head on his shoulders and a sense of direction and all these things my father thinks are so wonderful." She sighs heavily. "So, anyway, after I dated him three or four times . . . He's awful cute, too, don't you think, Meem?"

"If you like the preppy type."

"Yuh, well, my mother said he was so clean-cut and everything. So when Dub said he *loved* me . . . No

one's ever said that to me, Meem. Except my mother and she loves everything, practically. But no boy's ever said that, Meem. . . ." Tears well up in her big eyes again. I feel like crying myself.

The bus comes to Chestnut Hill, our stop. We get off and, in spite of the rain, walk slowly down Riverview Avenue.

"Dub said he loved me and I believed him," Tuna gulps, "and he said I was beautiful. He called me every night, gave me rides home from school. He was really, really sweet. And I was so, so lonely, you know, Meem? I mean, my parents are always running around doing things, and here I am, sort of a big . . . nothing. I'm not a good student like Brink. I don't have any hobbies, really. There's, like, nothing *special* about me. Except I used to be pretty popular. . . ."

"You still are, Tuna."

"Not like I was before . . . before I started dating Dub steadily. So, anyway, my parents were really pleased every time I went out with Dub. Am I talking too much?"

"No, not at all. Go on."

"So one night when my parents were out, Dub comes over. I was really glad to see him. My house is creepy when there's nobody there but me. And he starts telling me that—that sexual love is a—a way of proving a couple's devotion. . . ."

I can't help it, I snort, making Tuna smile faintly.

"That's what he said, honest. He said"—Tuna

lowers her voice in imitation of Dub—" 'Sexual love is a sign of a man and a woman's devotion to one another, Tuna.' Wow, when I think back to it I wonder how I kept a straight face. . . . If he could've heard himself.

"And now I'm *bored* with him. Oh, Meem! I want to go back to the way I was before, dating and flirting with lots of guys. I want to be like you, Meem. I'm . . . too *young* to be tied down to him. And Dub—he's talking about *marriage*."

"Marriage?" I can't help it, my voice squeaks.

Nodding sadly, Tuna says, "Remember me telling you I went over to Dub's house last Friday night? Well, after we, you know, had sex in his crummy old bedroom that looked like a bomb had gone off in it . . ." I clap my hand over my mouth to keep from breaking up. "It was so hideous, Meem." She shudders. "He's got this raggedy old blue plaid bedspread with these tacky matching curtains and college pennants on the walls. . . ."

"Are you serious?" I interrupt. "Are you absolutely *serious* or are you just making this sound as unromantic as possible? I mean, come on, Tuna—*pennants?*"

She nods, blowing her nose. "Really. But the worst part was, well, there I am lying in his nasty old bed that smells like . . . like old socks! Oh, Meem, his mother must be the worst housekeeper in the world! And there I am, and he's being . . . he's talking about his future . . . *our* future."

"Don't tell me he started with his goals again."

"Yuh, he did." She rolls her eyes. "Dub says when he graduates from college—"

"He plans that far ahead?"

Tuna nods miserably. "He—he says he's going on for an M.C.A. . . ."

"M.C.A.?" I think for a second. "Oh, you mean an M.B.A. as in Master of Business Administration?"

"Yuh, that sounds right. So then he's going into business for himself or maybe international banking," Tuna says, choking back tears. "Dub also says we should get married as soon as he graduates from college, that that way I can get a job"—she sobs—"and help pay for his M.C.A. or whatever it is. I don't want to marry him, Meem! I don't even want to—to date him anymore. At least not *just* him. What'm I going to do?"

By this time, we've reached my house.

"Aren't you coming over?" Tuna says as I stop at my front walk. "Please, Mimi, I don't want to go home alone."

So I go over to Tuna's, but it turns out her mother is home from work. She gets a look at Tuna and says, "Sweetie! Why're your eyes so red? Oh, I hope you aren't coming down with something. I'll get you some aspirin."

Mrs. McElliott trots out and Tuna turns to me, whispering, "What I should tell her I really need is—

the Pill. Wow, but that'd blow her mind." Then her smile evaporates. "Oh, Meem, what am I going to do? How'm I going to get out of this?"

"I think you'd better start by talking to Dub."

"Oh, wow. I wish I'd never gotten into all this in the first place. And it's my parents' fault. It's their fault that I had to, like, reach out to him. If they didn't treat me like the black lamb of the family or something I never would've gotten into this mess."

The black lamb? I just don't have the heart to tell her the expression is *sheep*.

When I get over to Harriet's, I find her out in back swathed in a yellow rain slicker, working in the garden. If the way she's jabbing at the wet earth is any indication, Harriet is in an extremely foul mood.

"I went to see old maid Schwartz today"—Harriet flings weeds and dirt around—"and he says I have no business doing gardening or any other form of physical activity. He says I should hire a nurse. The fool. How does he think my bones are going to knit if I don't do something to urge them along? Not to mention losing all my muscle tone."

There's so much stuff flying through the air it looks as if a mini-tornado has struck.

"These doctors don't know what they're talking about half the time," Harriet goes on. "Do you know that Schwartz had the temerity to ask who was putting my eyelashes on for me!"

"What'd you tell him?" I squat beside her.

"I told him I was, who else? He was very surprised I could manage it and I told him if you get mad enough, if you really want to do something, you can usually figure out a way to do it! Remember that, Mimi.

"The gall of that young man asking a woman my age a personal question like that!" A weed whips through the air, narrowly missing me. "And another thing I'll tell you," Harriet says, stabbing the spade into the dirt, "the next time that idiot calls me by my first name I'm going to put him in his place—*fast*. You don't hear me calling him Albert, do you? No, indeed you do not.

"All I have is one broken bone," Harriet says, snapping her teeth together. "You'd think I have one foot in the grave the way that quack carries on. Look at me!" She thumps her chest, spilling dirt down the front of her slicker. "How many people my age do you know who are in such good shape?"

"Not very many," I assure her. Of course, I add silently, I don't know what your age is.

"Which reminds me of another thing that fool keeps saying that infuriates me. Every time I see him," Harriet says, "he remarks on my good health! How can he talk about my good health when I'm wearing this thing?" She holds her cast straight up in the air and waves it angrily.

Sometimes, like now, I find Harriet a bit tough to follow. I think what it boils down to is it's okay for her to say something about herself, like how old she is or how healthy, but God help anyone else who dares to.

All of a sudden, Harriet seems to lose steam. She drops the spade and I help her to her feet. As we walk toward the house, she keeps her hand on my shoulder.

"Tell me about you, Mimi. What's going on in your life? Sometimes older people forget to inquire about the health of young people."

"Oh, my health is great."

"Good. Have you heard from your mother lately? I haven't heard you mention her for a long time."

"Yeah, I had a letter from her. She says we're getting together in New York next month. For my birthday. But you know Aggie. . . ." The look on Harriet's face is screaming sympathy so I tell her, "It's okay. I can handle it, Harriet. Really."

"I know you can handle it, Mimi. I only hope you realize your mother has many good qualities. I always admired her drive, you know," Harriet says as we go up the front steps. "She made a mistake when she chose the traditional role of wife and mother. Your mother and I had a lot in common. I know what she did was, *is,* hard on you, but Aggie's not a bad person. And you remind me of her in, oh, many ways. Your sense of humor, for one."

Well, what do you know? No one's ever told me that.

A short time later, as I'm making a deluxe hamburger patty (that means you throw in a little Worcestershire sauce and dry mustard) and salad for Harriet's supper, I notice she's tied a scarf around her hair. She never wears scarves. I suddenly realize it must be because her hair's dirty again, so I offer to wash it for her.

She takes me up on my offer so fast that it makes my hair curl—and considering how curly my hair already is, that's not funny.

Harriet has to lean over the kitchen sink so that I can wet her hair. The whole process is complicated by the fact that she's a good three inches taller than I am. First I drop the plastic shampoo bottle about five times. Then I bash her head into the spigot not one, not two, but *three* times.

"Mimi," Harriet says in a weak voice the third time, "could you be a touch more careful? I already have one broken bone. I don't need a concussion, too."

Of course, my old enemy Scratchy II doesn't help matters much. As I'm rinsing the shampoo out of Harriet's hair, Attack Cat starts racing back and forth across the kitchen floor, clawing my ankles every other trip.

Finally I plug in Harriet's hair dryer and it blows up, sending sparks shooting all over the counter and nearly igniting a potholder.

By this time, Harriet is laughing so hard she can't speak. As I go out the front door, she gasps, "I don't know what I'd do without you, Mimi. You're good for the soul."

Well, at least I'm good for something.

Chapter Nine

I've just finished getting ready for bed when the phone rings. Even before my father calls me, I know who it is.

"Aggie!" I say like I'm extremely surprised.

"How are you, Babes?" My mother's voice booms across three thousand miles. "See, I never forget to call you. Once a month like clockwork, right?

"Listen, hon, Sherman and I were sitting here relaxing and I said, 'Sherm, I hate to say it, I really do, but I don't think I can manage all those interviews and appointments, not to mention appearances on those blasted television talk shows, *and* spend time with Mimi in the Big Apple next month. It's more than my nerves can stand.' And Sherm agreed with

me, Mimi. Why, I'd be so uptight, you'd hate it, you wouldn't enjoy it. I hate to disappoint you, Mimi, but you know how high-strung I am, right? You know, don't you, hon?"

"Yeah, Aggie, I know. So . . . when do you think—?"

"Soon, I promise this— (What *is* it? Oh, yeah, well you tell them if they can't do any better than that they can stuff it!)

"So, where was I? Oh, right. Maybe in July, Babes. I'm real sorry about it, Mimi. It's hard on me, too. Uh, just a sec, hon. (Sherman, if you don't stop taking my glass away . . . What? *What!* I already told you what to do about that letter. . . . I don't care! Who's on the other line? Well, tell 'em to wait!)

"So, now where was I? Uh, who's on the line?"

"It's me, Aggie."

"Well, of course it's you!" She laughs shrilly. "Things are hectic out here, Mimi. What an understatement!" She laughs again. "So, how's everything going, hon? How's Mr. Dull? You know I'm kidding. How's the new bride and what are you up to these days?"

"Dad's fine, Aggie. I'm working on the school news—"

"This is only my third, Sherman. . . . No, it is not!"

I'm holding the receiver away from my ear just as Cassandra walks through the room.

"Well, that's wonderful. . . ." My mother's voice assumes the sort of condescending tone she uses when she talks to me. I think she still thinks of me as a nine-year-old. "Now, Mimi, I hate to do this to you, but you understand— (If you do that again, I swear to God I'm going to get a muscle cramp . . . a *cramp,* do you hear me?) Listen, something's come up, Mimi . . . an emergency," Aggie shrills. "I'm awfully upset about next month, kiddo, but—"

There's a loud crash. Then the sound of the telephone receiver hitting the floor. Finally after much crashing and shouting a man gets on the line.

"Mimi? Hi, this is Sherman Stratford, your mother's agent."

"Yeah, hi. What happened?"

"Your mother knocked her martini off the table. It's all right, just a little broken glass. She's gone to her room, though. You know how she is. I'll have her call you back tomorrow. She's not herself today. I think it's close to her time of the month."

"What?" This from a man I've never met.

"Oh, your mother's due for her period, I think. She gets very irrational around her time of the month. Some women do, you know."

"No, I . . . didn't know."

Just as I'm making a face at the receiver, Cassandra passes through the room again.

"Oh, sure," Sherman tells me, "I keep track of things like that for Agatha. You know how she is."

I wish he'd stop saying that. I mean, I am her daughter.

"She can't keep anything straight! Ha!" Sherman barks delightedly. ("All right, Agatha, I'm coming!)

"She needs me now, Mimi. Real nice talking to you, though. Bye-bye." *Click.*

I go into the living room and my father says, "What's up?"

"Like I told you—she can't see me next month. God . . . it sounds like a madhouse out there."

"No doubt it is," Dad says quietly.

I kiss him good night and go up to bed.

Chapter Ten

As I come out of Biology on Friday afternoon, Lars sweeps me off my feet (*pushes* is more accurate) into Mr. Krineheder's office (he's the janitor and his office is the broom closet). The first thing I think of is Thank God My Scab Is Gone. Lars is wearing these jeans that look as if they were washed and dried with him in them.

The second thing I think of is the smell of formaldehyde, which I'm sure clings to me. We've been dissecting these disgusting fetal pigs for the past month.

Anyway, Lars must not detect the Eau de Formaldehyde because he sweeps me into Mr. Krineheder's office and kisses me so passionately that I forget everything. It's wonderful, it's glorious, it's . . . wait a

minute, it's his hands . . . they're moving around. His breathing's coming awfully fast. . . .

Oh, *whoa,* I think . . . I think he's trying to . . . to *feel* me . . . oh, my *God.*

Unfortunately, I accidentally yell this out loud and Lars is so startled he forgets about the slop bucket behind him, steps backward, and falls, knocking over two brooms and a mop.

I help him up.

"Canfield," Lars says with this look on his darkly handsome face that says If She Were a Guy, I'd Break Her Face. I brush at the dust all over the seat of his jeans, but he grabs my wrist. "I finally get it, Canfield."

"Uh, what, Lars?" I ask, demure as hell.

"What you've been trying to tell me for the past month. You're just not ready for it, are you?"

"What?" For lack of anything better to do, I start biting my thumbnail.

"You aren't ready for any kind of *real* relationship." Lars shakes his head disgustedly.

Oh, God, why am *I,* of all your children, why am I such a jerk? Then I chomp down on my thumbnail and immediately it gives up the ghost.

So now in addition to this scene of devastation and chaos, I have an absolutely idiotic *grin* on my face and . . . *I can't help it! I think I'm going to crack up!* Please help me, God.

He's saying something. He's angry, I can tell because his face is dark red. Maybe he's going to hit me.

No, Lars wouldn't do that. Listen, Mimi, just try to contain yourself long enough to hear what he's saying. *Please.*

". . . like you a lot, Canfield. You're a lot of fun and I'm turned on by you. But you've got to make up your mind. I'm looking for something more than hand holding and clowning around. If you're not up for it . . ." He shrugs those gorgeous broad shoulders and shoves his hands into the pockets of those jeans. "If you're not up for it, I'll . . ."

This is the first passionate speech any guy has ever made to me—not to mention that it's from Lars and—Oh, no, I'm making *noises*, little pops and snorts, the kind I make when I'm trying not to laugh.

He's stopped talking. He's staring at me. So what do I do? I go, *"Ah-ha-hah-hah-ha-hah!"*

The look on his face is so terrible . . . as if he might cry. Then he storms out, slamming the door behind him. I stop laughing and start crying instead. I'm still crying when Mr. Krineheder comes in and pats my head like I'm a three-year-old.

For the rest of the afternoon I consider ways of killing myself. This time I've really blown it.

"Mimi!" Tuna bombs up to me after school. "I talked to Dub and he swears on his mother's grave that he—"

"I didn't know his mother was dead."

"She's not. You know what I mean. He *swears* that he hasn't told anyone about, you know, us. Like, I'm

so relieved. What's wrong, Meem? Is everything okay? You look kind of sick."

"I feel terrible. I'm going to kill myself, I think."

"Oh, no, you won't. Not you, Meem."

I look at her. She's never sounded so definite in her entire life. "How do you know, Tuna?"

She puts her arm around my shoulders, saying, "Oh, I just, you know, sort of know."

I stare after her as she runs across the street to meet Dub. I mean, how can you argue with reasoning like that?

"Hey, Canfield," Jerry Striggles calls, "what's the trouble? You look down, girl. Want a ride home? I've got my mom's car."

Jerry's a good kid. We don't talk much on the way to my house, and when we get there he leans over and kisses me on the cheek. It makes me want to cry again, but I don't. I don't want to explain a running nose and bulging eyes to Cassandra.

Jerry Striggles is really extremely sweet.

Chapter Eleven

On Saturday I go over to Harriet's and find her lying on the Victorian sofa in her bathrobe. She looks awful. About ninety.

"Hi, Harriet. You look a little on the peaked side."

"Peaked isn't the word for it," she says in a flat tone. "I fell trying to get into the bathtub this morning."

"Can I do anything to, uh, help?"

"No, child. I think it's time for something more drastic. I'm going to call one of those . . . nursing services on Monday. Dr. Schwartz has given me several numbers to call."

My stomach flips at her tone. That and calling the old maid doctor.

"You don't look all that chipper yourself," she says suddenly. "There's something in your face and it isn't

just your"—she smiles slightly—"concern for me. What is it, Mimi?"

"Oh, it's no big deal." I look away from those sharp blue eyes.

Struggling into a sitting position, Harriet snaps, "I may be ailing, but I'm not senile—yet, at any rate. Tell me."

"How do you always know when something's bothering me?"

She sniffs indignantly. "I've studied human beings all my life and you are the picture of adolescent despair. Now, what's happened? Is it your mother?"

"Among others." I sigh. "Aggie finked out again. I knew she would. Oh, my problem is so dumb." This really irritates Harriet. I can tell from the way she socks the pillows behind her. So I blurt it out. "It's about . . . what's really bothering me is . . . well, it's sex."

"S-ex?" Her voice cracks slightly. "It's that boy you've told me about, isn't it? What's his name, Lark? No, that isn't right. Now, don't tell me. I'll get it. Hmm . . ." She holds up her good hand as she thinks for a second. "Lars? Yes, that's it. I knew it was something odd like that." Shrugging, she adds, "Well, you're almost sixteen, aren't you? Seems a bit young. I hope you've taken precautions, Mimi."

"No, no." I laugh at her stern tone. "I'm not having sex with Lars. *That's* the problem. I mean, I don't really want to . . . yet. Am I strange or something?"

Harriet looks relieved. "You aren't strange at all, child. Are you in love with him?"

Shrugging, I answer, "I'm not sure. I like him, though . . . a lot."

"Well, then, there's your answer to the question."

"What?" I stare at her blankly.

"If you aren't in love with him, why sleep with him? Oh, I don't care what all the magazines say or that book, what was the title? *The Joy of Sex,* that's it. I read it, you know. There's little joy in sex, Mimi, if there isn't real affection and concern for the other person. I don't care what anyone says about the sexual revolution—you take it from an old woman who knows a thing or two having survived eighty-three years! Oh, dear." Harriet covers her mouth with her good hand. "Well, now you know how old I am. You're the only living soul who does now that poor Teruko's gone, so I'll know who snitched if it gets around!"

I burst out laughing and her expression softens slightly. Then I say, "But, Harriet, Lars is furious with me. He says he's not going to go out with me anymore, if I'm not . . . not ready for a—a relationship. I don't know. Sometimes it seems as if everyone else is doing it, so I start thinking I'm really out of it. I'm making a big deal out of nothing."

"Peer pressure," says Harriet, nodding.

"Heavy peer pressure. I think I'm one of the few fifteen-year-old virgins left in the world. If you can

believe what you hear. Maybe I am immature, like my best friend, Tuna, said once."

"Oh, splat," Harriet says. "Don't you dare do something you're not ready for just because you think everyone else is doing it. If you ask me, there's entirely too much conversation about the subject these days.

"Good heavens, there's so much talk about sex that it takes all the romance out of it. All the fun! I read the newspapers and if you can believe *them,* there are plenty of people your age shooting dope and snorting pot or whatever. Does that mean you have to go along with that foolishness, too? Whatever happened to that expression about doing your own thing?" Leaning over, Harriet picks Scratchy II up. Thank God. The little mutt's been whining at her for the past five minutes.

"So, you definitely don't think I should have sex with Lars?"

Harriet gives a short laugh. "Mimi, if you have to ask somebody else that question you definitely aren't ready for it. Sex is a wonderful, beautiful bond between people who care about one another. Without commitment, though"—she waves her hand and Scratchy II hops down and walks out, his tail waving in disdain—"it's nothing, absolutely nothing more than a mechanical act."

Chapter Twelve

I hate it how great you feel after you've gotten some problem off your chest, and then as soon as you're away from the person you unloaded it on, the problem starts bugging you again. Like this morning, the first thing I thought of when I woke up was Lars. I felt so depressed I could hardly hoist myself out of bed.

One look at Tuna and I know she's down, too.

"What'd you do this weekend?" I ask on the way to the bus stop.

"Go out with Dub. What else?"

"That beats hanging around the house playing most unpopular girl of the year like I did."

"That's devious," Tuna says, rolling her gigantic eyes.

"What do you mean 'that's devious'? *Devious* means dishonest."

"It's an expression, Meem," she says, sighing patiently. "It means I doubt going out with Dub is more exciting than staying home. Get with it, Meem."

I don't have the strength to tell her that the word she wants is *dubious*.

"You didn't have fun with Dub, huh?"

"Wow, you can say that again."

"You didn't have any—"

"Mimi! I'm not in the mood to joke around about it!" Tuna tosses her curls angrily. "You don't understand how really bad this whole thing with Dub is."

"Okay, tell me about it. I promise I'll stop with the wisecracks."

"Well, I tried to, like, talk to him about . . . dating other people, you know? And wow, was that a mistake." Her shoulders slump as we start up the hill to the bus stop.

"Dub got pretty upset, huh?"

Tuna sighs so gustily that a curl on either side of her face wings out. Fortunately I resist the impulse to smile because she looks at me, saying, "Worse than just upset, Meem." Her voice drops to a whisper. "He *cried*. He actually cried real tears and said . . . he loves me and I—I can't leave him."

"Good God." I'm also whispering. "How—awful."

"Yuh. I feel like I'm ancient. Like I'm twenty-five or something and I'm . . . *trapped*. Oh, Mimi, I—I wish I'd never gotten into this. What'm I going to *do*?"

Just then there's a screech of brakes behind us and

we whip around to see clean-cut Dub in his yellow Capri.

"Hi, gorgeous!" he yells out the window. "Want a ride?"

"See what I mean?" Tuna whispers. "He won't leave me alone. Come on, you're coming with me." She clamps onto my arm and drags me over to the car. Dub looks really, really thrilled about having me tag along.

But Tuna hurls me into the backseat. Then she chatters like some magpie all the way to school . . . to me. She completely ignores him. And he glares at me in the rearview all eight miles of the trip.

I mean, who needs it?

If I had any delusions about the way the rest of the day was going to go, they were zapped when I ran into Lars in the hall. And I mean smack into him. I didn't recognize him from the back on account of this blond female person who was hanging off his arm. . . . It turns out to be Lynn Mettelman, who is absolutely beautiful, of course.

So I'm in such a hurry to escape Tuna and lover boy that I smash into Lars and Lynnie. Lynnie giggles and Lars glares. Then they sweep off down the hall. Leaving me feeling like a nerd: a real ugly, red-headed nerd.

As soon as I get home, Cassandra pushes the latest issue of *Time* magazine at me. "Your mother's film got a good review."

IF IT'S NOT FUNNY, WHY AM I LAUGHING?

MGM's latest spoof, *Coppers*, features copper-haired comedienne Agatha Canfield as a zany, sometimes decidedly, but pleasingly dumb female cop. *Coppers* is a funny, warmly touching story about a single working gal and an orphaned street urchin who clean up the Los Angeles Police Department.

Miss Canfield is middle-aged, but fresh as any ten-year-old. Her sidekick, twelve-year-old Lisa Tree, cannot match Canfield when it comes to wisecracks and misadventure. In the end Canfield gets the crooks and the kid gets a home with the lady cop. *Coppers* will keep you laughing.

"Well," Cassandra says as I toss the magazine down on the table, "what do you think of that?"

I say, "Who wants a ten-year-old for a mother?" and go upstairs to my room.

Chapter Thirteen

Harriet's getting worse. Yesterday, Wednesday, she told me she'd called every one of those nursing agencies and not one of them has an available RN. Harriet's acting defeated and beaten down.

I never thought she, of all people, would give up and stop fighting.

"Mimi," Tuna says on the way to the bus stop, "did you hear what I just said?"

"No . . . I didn't. What'd you say?"

"I said, now Dub wants me to go on the Pill."

"Maybe you should."

"Tsk." Tuna rolls her eyes at the pale blue sky. "What've I been *trying* to tell you lately?" She enunciates slowly, "I . . . don't . . . want . . . to . . . sleep . . . with Dub anymore!"

"Well, don't then. Who's forcing you?"

"What'm I supposed to do? Break his heart or something? Wow, I thought I could depend on you, Meem. And my parents are taking off again this weekend. Last weekend they went to Hotchkiss for Brink's graduation. I stayed home because I couldn't break my date with Dub. And"—again she rolls her big brown eyes—"I *know* Brink could care less if he ever sees me again. The day after graduation he took off for Canada where he's got a summer job in a paper mill. My parents haven't stopped raving about it yet.

"And this weekend," she sighs noisily, "this weekend, they're going to Martha's Vineyard to visit some old college friend of my mother's. Wow, but sometimes I think they carry this freedom bit too far, know what I mean?"

"I thought you thought it was great."

"You should've heard my mother last night." Tuna shifts her books from one arm to the other as we reach the Chestnut Hill sign. "She made this big thing out of saying I could go with them if I wanted to. But they don't want me. I can always tell when my mother doesn't mean something. Like, she said, 'I'm sure the Stephenses would love to have you, Fortuna' "—Tuna does a wicked imitation of her mother's sugary voice—" 'but you wouldn't enjoy it, swee-tie. There'll be no one there your age. And they have a little, *tiny* beach house. You'd have to sleep on the couch. Wouldn't

you rather stay here? You could have a party. Daddy and I know we can trust you.' Blah, blah, blah."

"Translate the blah, blah, blah for me, will you?"

"It's not funny, Mimi."

"Sorry . . . she hurt your feelings, huh?"

"No, because she's right, I don't want to go with them. It sounds like the drag of the earth. But, like, what'm I supposed to say after she goes through all the reasons why I wouldn't have a good time? What really bothers me . . . You're going to think this is weird, Meem." She blows a curl out of her eye. "But I'm getting sick of all this permissive stuff. All this 'we trust you' stuff she keeps giving me. Why does she trust me?

"Like, I'm only sixteen years old! I really get scared sometimes, Meem, trying to make some of the big decisions about my life. I mean, I could be a pusher or addict or something! What it bakes down to—"

"Uh, I think that's *boils* down to, Tuna."

"Yuh, what it boils down to is . . . they don't give a flying you-know-what about me. . . ." Her eyes fill with tears. "They want me to leave them alone so they can live their lives without being . . . bothered with me."

"Come on, Tuna," I say as she begins to sob, "your mother's always raving about you. They care a lot, you know that."

"It's not that they don't love me, Meem. I know they do. It's just, I wish they'd, like, care enough to—to *protect* me more, you know? I wish they'd *try,* any-

way, to keep me from doing some things. I really wish they'd, like, put the stops on me."

I think about it before I say it, because I know it's going to make her mad, but I say it anyway. "Maybe you should try to put the stops . . . on yourself, Tuna."

Sure enough, she gets mad. She totally ignores me until the bus arrives and when it does, she refuses to sit with me. This is a first in eight years of riding the bus together. Then she's halfway down the aisle before the bus stops in front of school.

I follow her into the building. Ron Pease stops her just inside the front doors. As I walk by pretending I don't see either of them, Ron grabs me.

"You two've heard about the Virgin Pool, right?" He winks and smooths his carefully combed brown hair to one side. Tuna groans and looks at the ceiling.

"Hah-ha!" Ron latches on to Tuna and me as we step backward. "Not so fast, girls. You haven't answered my question."

"You're a tough one to get away from, Ron," I tell him as he pins us against the wall. "Maybe you should consider a career as a debt collector. Or maybe as an enforcer for the mob."

"Witty, Mimi, very witty." Ron leers and grins. "Now, girls, about the pool. The bets are in, hah! You, Tuna, have nothing to fear. Everyone knows you're out of the running—ha, ha! But we've all *laid* bets on you, Mimi. Pardon the pun."

Tuna and I shake him off and walk rapidly down

the hall. "Listen!" Ron calls. "Do me a favor, will you, Mimi? I put my money on you for this Friday, that's May twenty-second. See if you can arrange it, okay?" His staccato laugh follows us down the hall.

Tuna looks as if she's been punched in the stomach. Then good old Dub saunters up, putting his arm around her. He whispers something in her ear.

O Dub of the square jaw and beady eyes, Dub of the broad shoulders and crew neck sweaters, Dub, you all-American boy, you—you are a piece of dung.

All day long kids make wisecracks and witticisms about that stupid Virgin Pool. There's a lot of talk about who put how much money on whom. Even some of the girls joke about it. Candy Pine actually brags about her name being in it.

"Peter asked me if I wanted him to fight the ones who organized the pool," she says proudly, "but I told him not to resort to physical violence, to keep his sense of humor about it." She smiles in a superior way at Tuna and me.

Tuna must be going home with Dub again because she's not waiting for me. I'm hanging around on the front steps waiting for the bus when Lars comes over. Lynn Mettelman is nowhere in sight. Not that I care . . . much.

"Hey, Canfield. What's with the cold shoulder? C'mon." Lars has the nerve to sound innocent *and* hurt as I turn my back on him. "Don't be like that." He puts his arm around my waist and squeezes.

Naturally I'm extremely ticklish. I burst out laughing and then he kisses my ear. Oh, God, he's gorgeous.

"Well, you started it, Lars." I'm trying like hell to sound unforgiving, but it's kind of tough when one is grinning like a lovesick fool.

"That's more like it, kid," Lars says, holding me close. "Sorry about the, uh, other day in the broom closet. And Lynnie . . . well, she was talking to me about a class we have together. You know, Canfield, you're my kind of woman. Hey," he says, releasing me so suddenly I just barely keep myself from falling flat on my face, "you heard your girl friend's having a party Saturday night?"

"Who? Tuna?"

"Yeah. Dub told me about it. You wanna go with me?"

A date with Lars, a real, live, actual date. "Oh, yeah, sure I'd love to go with you, Lars. What time will you pick me up?"

"Heck, no sense in that. You live right next door. I'll meet you over there, okay?"

"No! It isn't okay." He looks stunned. "I just remembered something," I tell him, "that makes me really furious with you and every other guy in this school."

"What'd I do? You kidding? You're a riot, kid." He elbows me in the ribs, but I don't smile.

"Ah, c'mon, Canfield. You're cute when you're mad. . . ." Then he bites my neck, I scream, and my

books sail out of my arms and land all over the front steps.

By the time we pick everything up, he's got me laughing. I mean, it's kind of hard to stay irritated with Lars.

As he hands me the last bunch of papers, I say, "Well, I *am* upset about that pool that everyone's talking about. I'm sick of hearing about it. How come everyone treats sex like it's a—a circus or something?"

"You're blushing," Lars points out, which of course makes me blush even more. "Look, Canfield, don't get so worked up about it. It's a joke, a harmless joke. If it'll make you feel better, I'll put a whole dollar on you. Everyone knows you're a poor risk. Ooof! Hey!"

I shove him, making him sit down suddenly, and run for the bus.

When Lars calls after dinner, I say two words before hanging up—"Buzz off."

"What was that all about?" Cassandra is standing in the doorway.

"Oh, that was a former acquaintance of mine."

Her hazel eyes shine the way they do when she's amused. "I'll get it this time." She picks up the phone on the second ring. "Hello? Who's calling? Just a minute, please. It's for you, Mimi. Larry Petronelli."

"Tell him . . ." I sprint across the room. ". . . I'm in the john." Closing the bathroom door, I sit down on the toilet.

"Oh, no," says the voice from the other side of the door. "You make up your own excuses." I hear her putting down the receiver and walking out.

"What do you want?" I say, icy as hell.

"Jeez," Lars says, "I can't figure out why you're so steamed up about this pool thing. It's a joke, that's all. Want to know who has the most money riding on her so far?"

I've never been able to hold a grudge. "Who?"

He laughs. "You won't believe it, but it's Candy Pine, and Headlight's the one who put the largest amount of money on her. Five bucks. She's got ten bucks altogether, now."

"Really?" It *is* kind of funny. "You should've heard her bragging about how Headlight wanted to defend her honor."

"Yeah, that's a good one—you should've seen him this afternoon. He had guys howling, they were laughing so hard. When he put down the five bucks, he said he had an unfair advantage seeing as how he was dating Candy. Ron Pease brought down the roof when he said, 'You can have it!' "

I force a few laughs. God forbid I should be a poor sport.

"So, I'll see you Saturday over at your girl friend's, right, Canfield?"

As soon as I hang up, the phone rings again.

"Mimi," Harriet says, sounding very formal, "I'm

calling to tell you that—I won't be needing you any longer."

"You won't?"

"Now, don't interrupt, please. This isn't easy for me, either. Dr. Schwartz has made arrangements for me to go into a . . . one of those places in Waterbury."

"You mean an old . . . one of those *homes*?"

"Yes, but he assures me it's a very good one, that I'll be moderately independent—if I don't like it, I can leave."

For practically the first time in my entire life I have zippo to say.

"Are you there, Mimi?"

"When are you . . . leaving?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. They're sending a car."

"*Tomorrow?* A car?"

"Is there something wrong with your hearing, child?" Harriet sounds more like herself. "Or is it my diction? They are sending the car tomorrow."

"It's just—I didn't— How come . . . It's so sudden, Harriet. What'm I going to do without you?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Harriet snaps. "You're going to keep right on doing what you always do. I don't suppose I'll see you before I leave. The car is coming at two.

"Well. There doesn't seem to be anything else to say . . . Mimi. I'll leave your check in the milk box,

in the event that I don't see you again. Good-bye, Mimi."

"Who was it on the phone this time?" Dad asks as I walk into the living room. "You certainly are getting to be popular."

"Yeah, extremely. That was Harriet. She's going to some . . . old people's home tomorrow."

Nobody says anything for a minute. Then Cassandra says, "It's probably for the best, Mimi."

"I'm afraid so," my father agrees. "Facts are facts and the fact is the old girl can't live alone any longer."

"She could've said good-bye to me. I mean, in person. I'm starting to worry about this strange power I have."

"What's that?" My father takes off his glasses, a slight smile on his lips.

"Well, there's something about me. Like with Harriet." I force a laugh. "She didn't want to say good-bye to me in person . . . you know, see me one more time. That's why she called."

"She's probably trying to make it easier on both of you, Mimi," my stepmother says softly. "She knows how fond of her you are."

"Maybe. But I think it's more than that. I'm cursed or something. I'm the type people seem to . . . run out on, know what I mean? First Aggie . . . now Harriet." I'm trying to be funny, but my father's face crumples suddenly, like an old paper bag.

Chapter Fourteen

I toss and turn for what seems like hours. Finally I start getting mad. At Harriet. I mean, that was really crummy the way she said good-bye. After all these years, I deserve something more from her. Pretty soon I'm really furious with her. I remember all those times she told me to get mad, to fight back.

Well, she's not running out on me like this, because I won't let her. I set my alarm for six o'clock. Before school tomorrow, I'm going to go see Harriet and say good-bye properly.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" Harriet sputters slightly as she opens the front door. I don't even wait to be invited in. I make my way to the kitchen.

"The little mutt." I nod at the wimp cat, who hops off the kitchen table.

"What are you talking about?" Harriet looks bewildered. Actually she looks pretty good. She's wearing the plum-colored smock with a leopard-spotted belt over a black straight skirt. And she must've gone to the hairdresser's yesterday because her scraggly, short hair doesn't look half bad.

"You're dressed kind of early, aren't you? I thought you weren't going until this afternoon."

Harriet looks away guiltily. "Oh, I . . . I called Heritage House, that's the name of it." Her nostrils quiver slightly, as if there's a bad smell. "I told them they might as well send the car early. They're picking me up at ten. You still haven't said what you're doing here at this ungodly hour."

"I came to get him." I point at El Wimpo, who whips his tail back and forth angrily. "I've always thought of him as a mutt, you know."

"No." Harriet almost smiles. "I didn't know. Scratchy's going with me. Heritage House isn't a nursing home. I'm not that bad off. Yet, anyway." She lifts her head proudly. "It's more of a condominium kind of arrangement. Scratchy and I'll have a little apartment of our own. But there will be people there who can look after us."

Harriet sits down suddenly. Her shoulders sag. "Oh, Mimi, I don't know how I can bear to leave here. I don't know if I can survive . . ."

"You've got to!" My voice is too loud. Harriet looks up, startled. "You're the one who always said to fight back at life, Harriet. And here you are acting beaten! How're you going to get better and come home if you start behaving like an old person!"

"But, child, I am old."

"Harriet, I need you. You've got to come back."

"I can't work. I'll never complete my . . . Oh, it's too hard. I'm *tired*." She covers her face with her hands, as if to shut the world out, including me.

"Then do something else besides sculpture. Paint, do collages. I don't know what, Harriet, but I know you can do lots of other things. Please. *Please* try."

"Now, don't you get sentimental on me, Mimi. *That* I know I can't bear. Look how late it is." She glances at the wall clock. "You'd better be off." Standing up, she pushes me toward the door. "I'll be all right."

Her inner brightness is back, the light that makes her whole face seem to shine. Maybe she will be all right.

As I go out the door, I turn to say good-bye one more time—and fall down the front steps. Scratchy II had chosen that moment to rub against my ankles.

Now, that is a first.

Harriet stands in the doorway hugging the little mutt, and laughing, too.

On the way to meet Tuna, I remember Harriet quoting that line from Frost's poem, the one about

the end of a season. And I could kick myself for forgetting a passage from another one of Frost's poems that I meant to tell her about. It was an extremely long poem called "In the Home Stretch" and we read it in English two weeks ago. Knowing that Robert Frost is Harriet's favorite poet, I paid particular attention to this poem and the passage:

> You're searching, Joe,
> For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
> Ends and beginnings—there are no such things.
> There are only middles.

I memorized this passage because I knew Harriet would've been impressed as hell—that's if I hadn't forgotten to quote it to her. The other reason I committed it to memory is because it's comforting. Even when I'm old and tired and my bones are brittle I want to remember that "there are only middles."

"Hey, Meem," Tuna says as the bus pulls up in front of school, "you ever wish you could go back to when you were, like, eight or nine and didn't have to make any big decisions about your life?"

"Once in a while," I answer. "Being a kid was much simpler, but let's face it, we've come to the end of that season."

"Season? What season?"

"Oh . . . skip it."

Chapter Fifteen

Lucky for me, neither Dad nor Cassandra questioned me much about Tuna's party tonight or about spending the night over there. I didn't have to lie about Mr. and Mrs. McElliott being out of town.

Tuna's been getting ready since six thirty. I mean, you'd think she was going to be presented at Court or something. It's now a quarter to eight and I don't know how much longer I can sit here giving my opinion on the various outfits she could wear tonight. For the eighty-fifth time she's stripped down to her underwear standing in front of her closet.

"Are you nuts, Tuna? I thought full slips went out with bloomers."

"So, I've decided to wear a skirt for a change. So, what's the big deal?"

"Yeah, but a full slip? That's weird."

"It's my party so I can wear what I want." She sticks her tongue out at me and pulls the slip over her head.

"God, you don't have to get so bent out of shape over it. Pantyhose, too? All right, let's have it. What's going on, Tuna? You never wear all that underwear."

"Oh, wow." She sighs, sitting down on her bed. "I can't think of anything else to do . . . except make it hard for Dub to, like, talk me into something. If I have all this clothing on, maybe he'll give up."

"That is the craziest reasoning I've ever heard. I also hope you don't suffocate," I add as she pulls on a white turtleneck over her denim skirt, then puts on a red checked western shirt and a wide, tan leather belt which she cinches on the last hole.

"You must weigh ten pounds more with all that stuff on. Not to mention it's seventy-five degrees out."

"We'll be outside and it cools off fast at night."

"Tuna, why don't you just tell him you, uh, don't want to . . . make love."

"Listen, Mimi"—she flicks her tongue over her tiny mouth—"when you're going steady with a guy it's not so easy to say no. Especially when you've been saying yes." She starts putting on lipstick and then stops, turning to face me. "I wish my parents were here. If they were, I wouldn't be having this problem."

"Why don't you use that old line about having a headache?" I snort.

Tuna bursts into tears and runs out of the room. Sometimes my attempts at humor are really out of place.

When the first couple of kids show up, Tuna unlocks the bathroom door and comes out. We all go out to the backyard.

The McElliotts' backyard is perfect for a party. The river runs through their property and they have one of the few spots that're deep enough to jump into without breaking your head. There's also a rope hammock between two willow trees. And the grass is smooth and flat and goes straight back to the woods.

By eight thirty, the place is packed. There are more than a few crashers. Lars shows up with a jug of whiskey sours and other kids bring beer.

Greeting me with a "Hiya, kid," Lars takes off to dance on the patio with Lynn Mettelman.

What is this strange power I have over men?

To give you an idea of what kind of night I think this is going to be, not even Headlight asks me to dance. He's too busy making out with Candy in the hammock.

Everyone's drinking like crazy and the noise level rises higher and higher. I stand around looking as if I'm just having a wonderful time.

Around eleven, Ron Pease turns off the stereo and yells from the living-room window for everyone to shut up, he's got some big announcement to make. A

few moments later he comes out the back door carrying a large piece of white posterboard.

"All right," Ron yells, "gather 'round! This is what you've all been waiting for! Ha-hah!"

I must be a little slow on the uptake tonight because I don't get what's going on until Lars comes over and whispers, "I knew you were a lousy bet, Canfield. Good thing I didn't put much money on you."

So that posterboard Ron's holding is the big Virgin Pool. And seeing as he's the ringmaster of this circus, I'll bet the whole thing was his idea. There are a list of girls' names in a column on the left with squares marked off to the right. Boys' names and dates are penciled into most of the squares.

"All right, boys"—Ron does a lousy imitation of W. C. Fields—"anyone care to place a last-minute bet on the lay of the day?"

There's much snickering and snorting from the boys. Most of the girls look vaguely uncomfortable, as if they're trying to decide if they should laugh or act insulted.

"No one wants to lay any more bets, huh?" Holding the posterboard high over his head, Ron makes this big show of looking around. "No? Well, then, the winner of the infamous Virgin Pool is . . . *Can-dy Pine*!"

Breaking away from the circle of kids, Candy runs

up to Ron and wrestles the board out of his grasp. She stares at it for a few seconds and gasps. Then she looks up at all of us. Her long hair is stark white in the light from the outdoor spots behind her. No one's laughing anymore.

Her mouth opens and shuts a few times, but no sound comes out. Then, "May twentieth? May twentieth!" She looks straight at Headlight, who's got this sheepish grin on his face. "How could you?" she screams. "You bet on May twentieth!" She points at him. "You said you . . . loved me, Peter! You liar! You said Wednesday night had . . . nothing to *do* with this pool—you *liar*!"

Then poor old Candy Pine throws up. And the only justice in this whole scene is she's a projectile vomiter and hits Ron Pease right in the face. *That* wipes his grin off.

As Tuna and another girl hustle Candy into the house, a couple of other kids who're chock full of sticky sweet sours and who-knows-what-else start vomiting, too. I mean, it's like something from a nightmare—drunk kids wobbling around the McElliotts' immaculate lawn.

Lars comes over to me. He looks shaken. "Look," he says, "this is kind of a bad scene. I think we'd better clear everybody out of here. Hansen's up on the patio chugging beers with Dub. He's, uh, also bragging about what he . . . what he got off of Pine. Yeah"—he looks away, embarrassed—"it's

raunchy. Listen, you'd better go find Tuna and tell her I'll find someone to take Candy home. I'll also get rid of Headlight and the others, okay?"

"Lars?" I put my hand on his arm. "Thanks a lot."

He gives me one of the sweetest smiles I've ever seen and says, "You're all right, kid." Then he touches my cheek so gently, so lovingly, that I think my knees are melting.

Just at this moment, an extremely drunk Bobo Johnson stumbles into us. Grabbing him by the arm, Lars leads him away.

So much for those tender moments shared by young lovers.

Chapter Sixteen

"What a, like, complete disaster that was," Tuna says as we drag ourselves up to bed. "I will never, ever throw another party. Remind me if I get a dumb idea like that again. And if Lars hadn't gotten everyone out of here, it might've been worse. Like, Dub was no help at all. He's a *fool*.

"You're lucky to have Lars, Meem," she adds, sighing. "I really, really envy you."

"I don't exactly have him. He looks on me as some kind of surrogate sister—or brother, maybe."

Tuna rolls her brown eyes toward the heavens. "You just don't know how lucky you are." She begins removing her layers of clothing. "One thing I've decided— Gimme a hand, will you?" Her voice is

muffled by the turtleneck. I yank it off and crack up when her curly head pops out.

"Seriously, Meem." Tuna gives me a look. "I don't ever want to see Dub again. Ever."

"Seems to me I've heard that before."

"Yuh, well, this time I mean it. He was a slob tonight. He told me I was just overreacting about the . . . the pool, that I shouldn't get so upset about it. Well, I don't care what *he* thinks, nobody deserves what happened to Candy Pine. Even if she is pretty mean sometimes, she didn't deserve that. Wow, it burns me every time I think of Dub telling me I'm overreacting. What a nerve. I'm going to tell him *he's* overreacting next time he cries!"

As she talks, I wrap my frizzy hair around the soup can. I'm not too swift with bobby pins, though you'd think I would be after all these years of attaching Campbell's to the top of my head.

"Well"—I struggle with the last pin—"I don't envy you having to tell Dub it's kaput."

"Yuh, it won't be easy. Mimi"—Tuna puts her hands on her hips and stares at the top of my head—"you're really going to have to do something about your hair before you, like, get married or anything. Really."

I crane my neck to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the opposite wall. There I am in all my glory, soup can on head looking like an oversized

sausage roll with spikes. My pop eyes peep out at me from their red rims.

"What," I say with an absolute straight face, "makes you say that, Tuna?"

She collapses and *rolls* on the floor, laughing. If I were sensitive, I think maybe my feelings would be hurt.

The next day, Sunday, Cassandra and Dad and I go to a cookout. Of course, I'm the oldest kid there by about eleven years. I feel like a fool trying to make conversation with a bunch of preschoolers for four hours. So much for family outings.

Monday afternoon, Tuna shows up on the front door step.

"Happy Memorial Day," I say, opening the door. "How're you doing, Tuna, old girl?"

"Can you get out?" she asks in a strange little voice. "Let's go to the treehouse."

I yell to Dad that I'm leaving and follow her down the hill to the river.

We cross the so-called bridge that my father put up years ago. If the Health Department ever saw this thing, they'd have him arrested. Once we're safely on the other side, I ask Tuna what's up.

Rolling her large brown eyes mournfully, she says, "This time I'm, like, *really* in hot water. With everyone. Really. I'm having a crisis."

"Tuna, you're always having a crisis. . . . Okay, I'm

sorry. I was just trying to add a little levity to the situation. What's happened?"

"My parents got home a few hours ago and we had the most horrible and horrendous fight we've ever had. Ever. Maybe I should leave home or something." Stooping, Tuna runs both hands over the velvety moss that borders the path to the treehouse. She doesn't say a word for some time, just squats there, patting the moss.

Finally, I kneel beside her. "Tuna, the suspense is killing me. What happened?"

"Oh, yuh, sorry, Meem. I forgot you were here. Well . . . I was trying to, like, *communicate* with them. Wow, what a mistake that was. My father's furious. He went down to his factory, that's what he always does when he gets mad at me or Brink. And my mother's in bed with a migraine. That's what *she* always does. I wish she'd just yell at me once in a while instead of getting those headaches. They make me feel so *guilty*."

"Which? Your parents or the headaches?"

"Both," Tuna answers. "You know, sometimes I hate both of them so much I can't even believe it."

"Yeah, I know. That happens to the best of us."

"Yuh. So what started the whole mess was when they got home from Martha's Vineyard and started going on and on about how beautiful the island is, all the famous people they saw—'luminaries' my

mother calls them. Wow, she gives me a pain sometimes.

"So, anyway, they were going on and on about how much fun they had. And here *I* was alone all weekend. I don't know what happened exactly, but all of a sudden I got mad. Like, something just went inside. When they finally got around to asking me what I did, I told them about the party . . . and wow, did I tell them. About Headlight and everything . . . plus a few."

"Did you really?" I pull myself into the treehouse and help Tuna in. Once she's sitting beside me, I say, "It's nice up here, isn't it? I always feel really safe here. As if no one can get me."

"Don't count on it," Tuna says darkly. "You're not safe anywhere these days. It's a jungle out there, Meem."

Fortunately I look at her before laughing, and she's not kidding. From the expression on her face I know she's dead serious.

"Am I boring you with my problems, Mimi?"

"Of course not. So what'd you tell your parents about the party?"

She licks her lips, smiling slightly. "I kind of exaggerated about how many kids were there. I told them two hundred came . . . and that it got out of control and that Dub was . . . coming on to me and I was scared and . . ."

"God. What'd they say?"

She runs her hands through her curls, saying, "They looked kind of wiped out, so I kept adding more and more stuff to the story. I mean, for once I really had their attention, Meem. When I told them about that Virgin Pool, I cried. Then my mother, she starts being very sweet to me, you know how she is. Dad didn't say much. He never does. But my mother started going on and being super sympathetic, saying dumb things to get me to stop crying. Then she says, 'I know. We'll take Fortuna up to the Oak Mill Tavern for dinner. Would you like that, sweetie?' Like I'm some six-year-old kid they can buy off by sticking food in my mouth!

"That's when I got really mad, Meem. I mean, I told them stuff that's been bothering me for years. At the top of my lungs. Oh, wow. It was some show. Just remembering it freaks me out."

"So, tell me exactly what you said, Tuna."

Sighing deeply, Tuna goes on, "I can't remember everything, but I started with how it makes me, like, really mad that they don't care that I get bad marks. I told them I was sick of hearing how smart Brink is while they don't care that I'm a dummy. Then I said they didn't care about me. . . ." Tears run down her face. "That's when my mother started crying. She fell into a chair with this shocked look on her face and Daddy started shouting about how he's given me

everything and how it's my fault I'm not happy, not his, that these are the best days of my life and I'm nothing but an ungrate. . . ."

"Uh, I think you mean *ingrate,* Tuna."

"Yuh, that's what he called me. Mimi, if these are the best days of my life, I'm in, like, really deep trouble. I'm, I'm so *miserable,* and I'm not sure why." She gulps and pauses to wipe her eyes.

"It's like, I mean, we're not poor or anything and my parents are still married to one another"—Tuna looks at me quickly and then away again—"and other than being on the dumb side there's nothing wrong with me, you know, physically or mentally. So, how come I feel so empty and . . . lost?"

I shake my head. It's a good question and I don't have an answer.

"I thought," Tuna says after a while, "if I could, like, find someone who'd love . . . just me, know what I mean? I thought that then I'd be all right. I thought that maybe Dub could make me feel . . . whole. I'm not too good at putting this into words. . . ."

"You're doing fine, Tuna. Go on."

"Wow, Meem, sometimes I don't know what I'd do if you weren't my friend." She stares out through the leaves for a few seconds. The sun is going down, turning the woods a deep golden green. "But Dub wasn't the answer, Meem. I'm more unhappy than ever. And Dub and I—we had the fight of the year over the phone this morning. Because I told him I

really meant it when I said I didn't want to go out with him anymore."

"Oh, boy."

"Yuh. He freaked," she says matter-of-factly. "He went crazy."

"Oh, boy," I say again.

"This time he . . . threatened me, Mimi. He said if I try to break up with him he's going to go to my father and tell him everything." We stare silently at each other. Then her eyes fill with tears again. "Oh, Meem, what am I going to do?"

Chapter Seventeen

Even though this week was a short one because of Memorial Day, it really dragged by. Nothing happened. Harriet's gone. Candy Pine didn't come to school because she's so embarrassed, I guess. And Dub went away with his parents this weekend, so Tuna hasn't had to deal with *that* situation.

Sunday morning I go over to Tuna's.

"Come on up," she whispers, and we tiptoe up to her bedroom. "My mother's still in bed and *he's* down at the factory." She closes her door and sits down next to me on the bed. "He still isn't talking to me."

A half hour later the phone rings and Mrs. McElliott comes in to tell Tuna it's for her.

"Oh, hello, Mimi," Mrs. McElliott says in a weak

voice. It's almost noon and she's still in her nightgown. She lowers herself gently into a chair across from me.

"How are you, Mrs. McElliott?" I'm nothing if not polite.

"Not too well, dear. I've been having headaches all week. Only went to work twice. Maybe it's the high pollen count at this time of year. I'm allergic, you know, to dust and animals and . . ."

That's one thing about Mrs. McElliott. When you ask how she is, she actually tells you. In fact she's still telling me when Tuna comes back in. It turns out el Dubbo is home and wants us (her) to go to a picnic he's organized on Beechwood Island. She also says Lars is with Dub.

I glance at Mrs. McElliott and feel kind of sorry for her. She looks pretty bad.

"I'll tell them to pick us up in an hour," Tuna says without waiting for me to say whether I want to go or not.

When she comes back from telling Dub we're going, she and her mother get into an argument about whether Mrs. McElliott should whip up a picnic lunch or if the boys can be depended upon to bring the food. I leave when Mrs. McElliott starts to cry. Sometimes I consider myself lucky that I don't have a mother around. At least I avoid these little mother/daughter scenes.

"Sure," Dad says when I ask if I can go. "Just be back in this house by six." He goes back to his crossword puzzle.

"Hey, Dad, isn't that cheating?" I point at the pile of books around him, the atlas, *Funk & Wagnall's,* and the *Random House Dictionary* that Cassandra gave him for Christmas last year. "I thought you were supposed to do crosswords without using reference books."

Cassandra looks up from her book. "David, your daughter just asked you a question."

Dad fakes surprise. He's a lousy faker. "What was that? I didn't hear you, Mimi. I was concentrating on my puzzle here." He pushes his glasses up on top of his head and knits his brow. I think he thinks that makes him look more sincere, that frown.

"I said, isn't that cheating?"

Now, he knows that I know that he knows exactly what I'm talking about, but he continues with the puzzled act. Finally Cassandra sticks out one long leg and nudges him.

They're laughing together as I go up to get ready for the picnic.

During the drive to Beechwood Island, Tuna keeps up a steady stream of chatter to Lars and me. She's also flirting like crazy with Lars. You can practically see the steam rising from Dub's head. Oh, boy, but this is going to be some picnic.

Just as we were getting into Dub's car, Tuna whis-

pered that the only reason she'd agreed to go was because Lars and I would be along to protect her. Great.

By the time we arrive, some of the kids have already spread blankets and towels out on a grassy rise above the beach. Beechwood Island is a state park on Long Island Sound. Actually the beach is more rock than sand, which is why one always picnics on the grass.

I take off my shorts and T-shirt, revealing my wimp bod in last year's Speedo. Of course, this results in many witticisms about my figure—or lack of it, rather. Then good old Headlight says, "Mimi looks like she wants to go swimming, don't you think, guys?"

He's sporting these trunks that look as if they're his father's. I mean, they are down around his knees, they're so long. He and Ron Pease start toward me, Ron chortling that awful chortle and Headlight grinning wickedly.

I jump behind Lars, saying, "Stay away from me, you groads! Go bug Candy, Headlight."

That was a stroke of luck. At Candy's name Headlight's grin vanishes. He sits down suddenly and plucks dispiritedly at the grass.

"She won't talk to me," he says sadly. "I've been trying to get her on the phone since . . ." He glances up at all of us and then down at the grass again. ". . . since last weekend. Every time I call, her mother says she's out. I think she's kind of mad at me."

It'd be extremely hard not to feel sorry for Headlight, he looks so down.

Then Tuna says, "I don't blame her . . . one bit!" in a voice that's so loud everyone looks shocked. We look from Tuna to Headlight and back to Tuna. "You pulled a really, really dirty trick on her, Headlight. If I were Candy, I wouldn't speak to you ever again! Ever!"

Headlight looks as if she's just spit in his face.

"Now, Tuna," Dub says, winking at the guys as if to say, *I can handle her,* "don't go getting involved in other people's business. It—" He puts his arm around her shoulders, but she shakes him off and stands up.

"Don't tell me what I can talk about, you, you—turkey!" Wheeling on the heels of her Nikes, Tuna takes off. Old Dub scrambles after her.

"Well, that's two down," Lars says, but nobody laughs.

"I called her about the picnic," Headlight says sadly, "so maybe she'll show. I gave the message to her mother."

It's a relief to all of us, I think, when someone yells, "Chicken Fight!" and everyone screams down the hill into the water.

I get on Lars's shoulders and we knock kids off left and right. We're down to Soozie Saltis and Jerry Striggles. Unfortunately Lars and I lose by default when Soozie, the cheater, grabs onto my Speedo.

There's a loud *r-r-r-rip!* And I fall off Lars's shoulders into the water. Good thing, because my suit is down around my stomach.

Of course, Soozie and Jerry run up to tell the other kids, leaving Lars and me in the water. I'm squatting, trying to figure out how to reattach my shoulder strap, when Lars starts wading toward me.

"What's the matter, Canfield?" he asks softly. "Did you lose something?"

I don't like the way he's smiling.

"You just keep away, I mean it!" I laugh, backing up, which is a titch difficult when you're hunched down in water and trying to tie a broken strap behind your back, for God's sake.

"I mean it, Lars. Quit it!"

"'Quit it,'" he mimics and gives a low laugh. The water's deeper now. I can almost stand up straight. I'm still fumbling around with my strap when Lars dives at me.

We're underwater. It's a dirty brown. Lars won't let me up. Oh, my God—his hands brush lightly over my . . . *Uh, oh, he's . . . !*

Like a bullet, I shoot up through that water, kicking my legs and flailing my arms. My hair's in my eyes, so I dunk my head back. When I come up, Lars grabs me and kisses me.

"Ummm," he whispers, "you taste good . . . salty. C'mon, Canfield, gimme more . . ." His hands slide down to my hips and he squeezes. I can't help it, I like

it. "Please, Mimi," he breathes, his eyes half closed, his face close to mine. "I promise I won't hurt you . . . please, Mimi . . ."

Hey, wait a minute! Where does he think we're going? He's pulling me out of the water.

I just realized something—Lars called me Mimi. He called me by my first name. I can't believe it!

"Hurry," Lars pants, dragging me through knee-deep water now. I'm stumbling around like a drunk because I'm trying to hold this goddamn suit up.

He's talking, he's saying he's crazy about me, that he won't hurt me . . .

Won't hurt me? Of course he won't hurt me. What's he talking—? Does he mean what I think he means? God, these rocks *hurt*. "Ouch!"

I'm beginning to think that *I'm in trouble.*

"Uh . . . Lars?" *Pant, pant.* "Ow!"

"Hurry before one of the others come," he orders, hauling me over the beach.

"Where're we going, Lars?"

He doesn't answer. We're *running* now, for God's sake. We're heading for that clump of trees up there—*Whoops!* He ain't getting me in there!

"I, uh, I think . . . are you listening to me, Lars? I hear somebody calling me. Yes." I stop abruptly, yanking my hand out of his. "There it is again." Lars looks around, this extremely confused and annoyed expression on his handsome, wet face.

"Huh? What're you talking about? Nobody's call-

ing you, Mimi. Now, come on . . ." he says, changing his tone. He moves toward me, pulling in his stomach, throwing back his shoulders, looking sexy as all get-out. "You realize I'm calling you by your first name, girl?"

I don't care if he calls me Canfield, Mimi, Margaret Astrida Canfield (yeah, that's really my middle name), I ain't going with him!

"Yup, there it is again, someone's definitely calling me. My mother, I think." I start running, actually hobbling, over the shells and rocks away from Lars. I don't look back, I just go.

This is definitely the end of it with Lars, but . . . that's okay. There'll be others. Just keep telling yourself that, Mimi.

Don't worry. I will.

I come over the hill at a dead run. Jerry Striggles laughs and points.

"You look as if you've been goosed, Mimi. Who's after you?"

The laughter stops abruptly as Lars comes up, looking very wet and very mad.

Behind us, a car honks. Everyone looks around as a baby blue Cadillac pulls up, spraying gravel all over the place. Out jumps Candy Pine.

"Headlight!" someone yells. "Your girl friend's here!"

A few jokes are cracked as Headlight wanders over. He's been drinking beer all afternoon and has

this really dumb grin on his face. I look at Candy and notice she's carrying a metal can.

"Hiya, baby," Headlight croons, putting his arm around her, but she twists away from him.

"Keep away from me, Peter," Candy says in a tone that makes everyone shut up. A few of the guys stand up.

"Aw, come on, Candy . . ."

"I mean it. Stay back!" Her voice rises crazily. . . . Something's wrong, I realize for the first time. Backing away from the car, Candy holds that can out in front of her.

"What'd you bring me, sours?" Headlight asks.

"Yeah, Candy," someone else says, "didn't your mother teach you to share with your friends?" There're a few nervous giggles.

"You aren't my friends," Candy says. A sudden wind springs up and clouds move across the sun. The wind blows her white-blond hair into her eyes, making her jerk her head. The blue-lensed glasses fly off, leaving her face oddly naked.

"I swear to God," Candy says as Headlight goes toward her, "you take one step nearer to me . . ." She pulls a pack of matches out of her pocket and I realize what Candy Pine means to do.

Lars must have realized it at the same moment. "Hey, look . . ." he says, walking slowly toward her with his hand outstretched.

"There's gasoline in this can! You or anyone else take another step toward me . . ." She lights a match. "I swear to you . . . I'll blow myself up."

The wind is the only sound. Our eyes are riveted on Candy Pine, who smiles, almost happily. Then, holding the lighted match in one hand, she sets the can down and removes the top.

Headlight makes a move toward her and she brings her hand with the match down in a sudden movement. The fumes from the gas ignite with a loud explosion. Flames leap up around Candy.

"Holy God!" Bobo Johnson yells and leaps on her, knocking her to the ground.

I don't remember which of us got there first with the blanket. It took the ambulance half an hour to arrive. That thirty minutes seemed like eternity. The police came, too, and questioned all of us. They said Bobo had saved Candy from being more severely burned. He went with Candy in the ambulance because he burned his hands, and because she wanted him to.

This has been the most terrible day of my life. I'm lying in bed asking myself how I could ever have thought anything that's happened in the past was bad, because nothing comes close to this. Nothing matches the look of terror on Candy's face as . . . her hair caught fire.

I can't sleep. I wonder if I ever will again. I can't get that expression on Candy's face out of my mind. Without those oversized tinted lenses to hide behind, she'd looked so young and so scared. Like the rest of us, I guess.

Chapter Eighteen

I didn't tell Dad and Cassandra what happened when I got home last night. They'll know about it soon enough. All day in school today, there were knots of kids in the halls, in the cafeteria, the girls' rooms, whispering about Candy Pine, editor of the *Viewpoint,* star student, attempting suicide.

The rumors I heard made me want to scream or cry, but I did nothing.

One of them was that Headlight had "knocked her up," a really elegant phrase, I think. Another was that Headlight was impotent (though that wasn't the term the kid used), and that Candy blamed herself. The third rumor I heard was from a little creep of a ninth grader. She said that Headlight had dumped Candy, so she'd tried to kill herself. I stood by and

listened to this garbage without saying anything, without saying that maybe what drove Candy to do what she did was love, that maybe she'd really cared about Headlight Hansen and had been so humiliated by that Virgin Pool incident that she'd tried to burn herself to death.

And maybe I can't communicate about something this serious, because I can't come up with any witticisms to lighten up this one. That's why I didn't say anything to counter those stupid rumors, because Mimi Canfield is just so *funny*. She doesn't deal with serious matters.

I'm so sick of the words used to describe sex these days. I never paid much attention to them until now, words like the ones I heard all day: *turn on, turn off, screw, do it,* and a number I won't even mention.

What I want to know is, has sex, or rather, has making love, become nothing but a mechanical act described by mechanical words?

Isn't there anything beautiful in it, anything tender and loving? Because if there isn't, if sex is just the conquest of one person by another, then it's not for me.

I'll wait until somebody who thinks the way I do comes along.

By the end of the day the rumors have escalated to reports that Candy's had a total nervous breakdown and is being transferred to Imogene Hill, a fancy

sanitarium. Tuna and I called the hospital when we heard that one.

They said she had burns over 15 percent of her body and was in fair condition. The family had stipulated there be no visitors.

Of course, it hit all the papers, local and New York. The *Gazette* carried the story on the front page:

LOCAL GIRL, 17, SETS SELF AFLAME
PERSONAL PROBLEMS CITED AS CAUSE

Cassandra watches me as I read the article.

"You were there, weren't you, Mimi? Why didn't you say anything about it?"

I shrug, sitting down opposite her.

"Why would a seventeen-year-old girl do something like that?" Cassandra asks. "What was so wrong with her life? It's unbelievable."

I look at Cassandra for a moment. . . . There's concern in those hazel eyes. I start talking and end up telling her the whole story, about the pool, about Tuna's party, about Candy herself, how she acted better and smarter than anyone.

Finally, I say what I've been feeling since Candy—since it happened. "I feel so guilty, as if it was partly my fault. Maybe there was something I could've done . . . to prevent it."

Shaking her head, Cassandra says, "People often

feel like that, I suppose, when something tragic like this happens." Spreading the fingers of her right hand, she stares at them for a time. "Who knows if you could've helped her, Mimi? The question now is, What can you do now? Because that child's going to need a lot of help."

Chapter Nineteen

The next day in homeroom, Mr. Stern stands up in front of us. I know immediately from the black expression on his face that we're in for something.

Mr. Stern is an extremely popular teacher at Hugh McNally, one of the main reasons being that he doesn't take anything from anybody. He also has a good sense of humor and resembles rather closely the American eagle. His nickname is the Beak . . . because of his eaglelike hooked nose. I don't think anyone's ever told him about his nickname. Even Mr. Stern's sense of humor wouldn't go that far.

Anyway, he stands up and yells for our attention. Tuna and I exchange looks at his no-nonsense tone of voice.

"A terrible thing has happened to a student in this

school." He clears his throat while turning a piece of chalk over and over in his hands. "We have heard, that is, the administration has learned, of a little pool, the Virgin Pool I believe it was christened." He glares out at us over his prominent nose. "It was a joke, no doubt . . . a harmless joke dreamed up by some of you . . . ah, clever young men.

"I don't suppose I need to elaborate on the point of something named the Virgin Pool, do I, hmmm?" he asks softly, smiling faintly. No one moves a muscle. "Is there anyone here who doesn't know what the pool was about? Hmm, fellas, anyone not familiar with it?

"Young ladies? You know what I'm talking about?" he asks politely. "No doubt some of you thought this little joke was . . . amusing?

"Damn you, kids!" he thunders suddenly, making me jump. He throws the piece of chalk at the blackboard, where it makes an angry white blot.

"You go around acting as if sex is something to laugh at, one big joke! The brunt of a *thousand* jokes! And this isn't the same old health class lecture, don't kid yourselves. I'm not telling you what to do or not to do . . ." Mr. Stern's voice drops again. "God knows each of you will make up your own minds . . . if you haven't already. What I'm telling you now is"—his voice rolls over our heads—"if you're going to behave like adults—and that means engage in sexual inter-

course—then you better darn well start accepting the responsibility like adults. And stop acting like a bunch . . . of . . . silly . . . *kids*." Sitting down at his desk, his eyes roam the room.

"Because there is a responsibility that goes along with sex. It can have very serious consequences, consequences so serious they can affect the rest of your life.

"If any of you have learned anything from Candy Pine, I hope it's that sex is no laughing matter. Now, go on!" His voice rises as the bell rings. "Get out of here, go on to your classes!"

There isn't one sound from thirty-two kids as we file out of the room.

With Candy in the hospital, Mrs. DeSantis says it's my job to write the editorial for the last issue of the *Viewpoint*. All day long I think about what Mr. Stern said, so instead of going to study hall or hanging out with Tuna during sixth period, I go see him.

"Uh, excuse me . . . Mr. Stern?"

He looks up from the papers on his desk. "Yes, Mimi? What can I do for you? Did you want something?" he asks as I gaze around the room, trying to work up my courage.

"Uh, yeah. I mean, yes. I want to ask you—I'm assistant editor of the paper, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, I wanted to ask you . . . Will you write the editorial for this month's issue? Along the same line as what you said in homeroom . . . this morning? It was really good," I blurt out.

Taking off his black-rimmed glasses, he knits his heavy brows. "You mean what I said about the juvenile attitudes some of you have about sex?"

"Yes. I think everyone should hear it, not just Homeroom one-oh-one. It was excellent."

"Thank you. I'm glad if I made an impression, but no, I won't do it." He holds up a hand as I open my mouth. "Not for the school newspaper, no, sir. I'm sorry, Mimi, but I can hear the screams of righteous indignation from parents, now. Oh, no." He shakes his head vigorously. "I'm not letting myself in for that."

"But, Mr. Stern, what you said is important."

He smiles, saying, "I'm sorry, Mimi. I talked to you kids the way I talk to my own because I was angry. But I'm not playing the Big Daddy role in public.

"Besides that, *you* should write the editorial. It's a student paper and you can say it as well, maybe better, than I can. It might have more impact on your peers coming from you. If you honestly think it's worth saying, then you say it." He puts his glasses back on and goes back to correcting papers.

I can just see it now. Baby-faced, gawky Mimi Canfield delivering a sermon in *print,* for God's sake,

about sex. I'll be laughed out of school, I'll be made fun of, hounded, maybe even hated.

I mean, who'm I to tell any other kid about sex?

But I'm going to do it. For better or worse, I'm going to write this editorial. Tonight.

Right after dinner I grab the *Funk & Wagnall's, Roget's Thesaurus*, and *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. I figure I need all the help I can get with this one.

I also figure there are only two weeks of school left, and I can hack anyone's abuse for that amount of time. I think.

I've just finished my opening:

> At the risk of sounding sanctimonious, this observer has noticed what appears to be an excess of sophomoric (no slur intended, classmates) behavior when it comes to physical relations between members of the opposite sex.

when Tuna calls.

"Can you get out for a minute, Meem? I've, like, really got to talk to you. Meet me at the treehouse. It's an emergency."

"You sure you can't wait until tomorrow, Tuna? I've got a lot of work to do."

"Oh . . . yuh, sure . . ."

Oh, boy. I think she's crying. "I'll be out in five minutes, Tuna." Hanging up, I run downstairs to tell Cassandra I'm going out for a while.

Dad's coming in the door just as I'm on the way out.

"Where's she going at this hour?" he asks as I run past him.

"I have a name, you know!" I yell over my shoulder on the way down the hill.

I think I hear Cassandra repeat, "She has a name, David," but I'm not positive.

The chestnut tree that grows out of the side of our hill looks huge and forbidding against the darkening sky. By the time I hear Dad calling my name, I've reached the bridge.

"I wanted to talk to you," he calls, "about that Pine girl. Where are you going?"

"It's an emergency," I yell back. "I have to meet Tuna." He yells something else, but I step onto the bridge and go across. Cassandra will handle him, I know.

Tuna is already up in the treehouse, waiting for me. "God, did we have to meet here?" I ask, crawling in beside her. "This place gives me the heebie-jeebies at night."

"What're the heebie-jeebies?" she asks dully.

"It's just an expression. God, Tuna, I can't even *see* you."

"Mimi, you just put your finger in my right eye."

"Sorry about that. Well? We going to sit here communing with nature or are you going to tell me what the emergency is about?"

"I . . . told her."

"Tuna, who did you tell what?"

"I told my mother about . . . you know."

"Tuna, kid, I'm freaking *out* up here. And I've got a lot to do. Please. Just tell me what you're talking about. Quick!"

"Don't get mad at me, Meem. I c-can't take it. . . ." she says, starting to cry. "I told her about . . . about having sex with Dub. . . . Yuh, I had to. He won't leave me alone, Meem. He, like, follows me everywhere, waits for me outside my classes. Today he threatened to send my father a letter about us, so I told my mother. I didn't know what else to do."

"God. You poor kid. What'd she say?"

"She cried. She's still crying up in her room. My father's working late all this week, so he's not home. That's the only good thing."

"Your mother's furious, huh?"

Tuna's pale hair flies back and forth as she shakes her head. "I wish she would get mad at me, yell or something, but instead she's up there blaming it on herself. Oh, Mimi, I can't stand it any longer!"

"Tuna, will you sit down? You're shaking the treehouse."

"Oh, yuh, sorry." She sits down again and takes a deep breath. "My mom blames me having sex with Dub on herself. I mean, I never heard of anything so *stupid*. She's always going to treat me like a—a baby, a little kid who isn't smart enough to make her own decisions or be responsible or—"

"Can I say something, Tuna?"

"Yuh," she sniffles, "I'd really like your opinion on this."

"Well . . . I think you're kind of tough to please, Tuna. I mean, one minute you're mad at them because they give you too much freedom, you want them to put the stops on you more, as you said. And the next thing I hear is you're upset because your mother won't let you take responsibility for yourself. You want to handle or be responsible for the problem, right?"

"Yuh, right."

"So—go ahead. I think you're right, Tuna. You're the only one who can do anything about solving the situation with Dub. You know, I feel kind of sorry for your mother. . . ."

"You do?"

"Yeah, it sounds as if she can't do anything right when it comes to you. Sometimes my father drives me crazy. I mean, I know how it is. But there are also plenty of times my mother drives me just as crazy, and she and Dad are the complete opposites of one another. I'm beginning to think there's just no winning when you're a parent."

"There's no winning when you're a kid, either."

"Maybe you should start doing what Harriet Guthrie always told me to do. Get mad."

"At my mother?"

"Maybe. Maybe you should tell her to stop blaming herself, that you're the one who made the mistake,

but you learned something from it, that she can help you with it, but it's really your problem.

"And while you're at it, Tuna, how about getting mad at Dub?"

"But, Mimi, he's the main problem. He's the reason I feel so—so *guilty*. I, like, really hurt him, Meem. Every time I think of the look on his face that first time I told him I didn't want to go steady anymore . . . it makes me cry every time I think of it." She puts her hands up to her face.

"I feel so sorry for him, Meem. Even though he is being a bastard about it. I wish—oh, I wish I could go back to the way it was before. How can I get mad at Dub after what I've done to him?"

"Look, I can see why you might feel bad for him, sort of. But he doesn't have the right to threaten you. He doesn't own you, Tuna. And you're forgetting something. Dub didn't do a whole lot for your reputation. He was the one who told people about your . . . well, your relationship, wasn't he?"

"Hey, yuh. You're absolutely right. I'd forgotten that. He bragged all over school about us." She sits up straighter. "Wow, that does make me mad! Wait'll I see him tomorrow."

As we walk back along the path—it's almost pitch black by now—Tuna says, "I'll tell you one thing. I'm going to think twice before I get involved . . . in . . . well, you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I know."

"Hey, Meem, there's something I've been meaning to ask you. How's it going with Lars?"

"It isn't. Or rather, it went. I wish you'd walk faster, Tuna."

"Well, like, I don't want to walk smack into the river, you know. So, what happened with Lars? I thought you were crazy about him."

"I was. But I wanted more of a platonic relationship and he, well, he was looking for something a little . . . heavier."

"Wow, I really admire you, Meem."

By now, we're feeling our way across my father's idea of a bridge, which is nothing more than a six-inch-wide plank with a wire strung across that you can hold on to.

"Why do you ad— Whoa! Wait till I get off this thing, will you, Tuna? I have to concentrate. Whew. I made it."

"You sure make a federal deduction about some things, Meem. What's so funny?"

"You don't mean federal deduction. That's what your parents take on their income tax. The expression is *pro*duction, Tuna, federal production. Boy, you're too much."

"Yuh, I know. But it makes life more fun sometimes, don't you think?"

Tuna says good night and heads for the wooden gate that separates our property from the McElliotts'.

"Hey," I call after her, "you never did say why you admire me."

I mean, let's face it, it isn't that often someone pays me a compliment, and I ain't about to let it pass.

Tuna turns around again. I can just make out her blond hair shining in the faint light. "You've got a good head, Mimi. You, like, always seem to know what you can handle. How'd you get like that, anyhow?"

"I think," I say, smiling, "it may have something to do with my father. If I ever step too far out of line, he threatens to break every bone in my body."

"Yuh. Must give you a—a sense of security having a father like that. See you tomorrow."

Boy, I think, things sure have changed since a month or two ago. As I climb the hill to my house, I realize I'm whistling. In the dark.

Chapter Twenty

Here's how I end my editorial on sex:

> Maybe it's time for us to realize that sexual love and the human body are beautiful. Both, after all, have been immortalized by sculptors, painters, poets, by all artists, for thousands of years.
>
> At the same time, both have been debased by jokes, many of which are tasteless, not funny. This observer does not mean to suggest that McNally students are guiltier of treating sex more lightly than other high school students. But perhaps it is time for all of us to acknowledge that sexual behavior is adult behavior, that it should be dignified, not debased.

> In the words of D. H. Lawrence, "Sex and beauty are inseparable, like life and consciousness."

I go to sleep feeling happy . . . for the first time in days.

Whoever said happiness was fleeting sure had it right. I mean, I got home from school today to find this telegram from Aggie:

> WILL BE IN EUROPE TWENTY-NINTH STOP HAPPY BIRTHDAY NOW STAYING THE RITZ IN PARIS STOP TRY TO MAKE IT NEXT MONTH MAKE UP TO YOU THEN
>
> XXX's
> AGGIE

She's really too much—this on top of a day spent dying for a glimpse of Lars. I tried to be extremely calm and everything when I told Tuna about it last night. But the truth is, down deep, there's a dark hurt whenever I see him or think about him. I saw him three times today and he pretended not to see me. He wasn't mean or anything. He just acted as if I weren't there.

I'm stretched out on my bed thinking of ways to kill myself. I know I shouldn't joke about it. It isn't

funny. Besides that, I'm the type who would probably fluff a suicide attempt.

This last thought makes me smile in spite of myself. Then Dad comes in.

"Who're you playing? Camille?"

"Who's Camille?"

"You've never heard of the great Camille?" He's incredulous.

"Would I ask who she is if I'd heard of her?"

"Greta Garbo played Camille in the thirties. She did a stupendous dying swan act—like this." He leans against the door and puts the back of his hand against his forehead, trying to look tragic, which isn't easy for a balding, slightly chubby man of forty-five.

"Ah-hah! I knew that'd get a laugh out of you. Come on, Mimi. Get up. I know you're feeling sorry for yourself, but you've got to get going." He glances at his wristwatch.

"What're you talking about? I'm tired. It's hot and I've had a bad day. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know you've had a bad day, but your stepmother sent me up here to tell you she ran into Mrs. Pine today, who asked that you visit Candy. Cassie'll drive you over and you'd better get moving. Visiting hours end at eight thirty."

Boy. Cassandra drives me over to the hospital and waits in the car while I go up. No doubt she didn't tell me about this little plan as soon as I got home from school because of Aggie's telegram.

As soon as the hospital smell hits me, I want to throw up. I'm also wondering *what* I'm supposed to say to an attempted suicide who doesn't even like me. Really nice of Cassandra to get me into this.

I peek through the door to Candy's private room. She's sitting up in bed watching TV. Her arms and hands are all bandaged and her hair's been chopped off! I guess they had to do that. I push the door wide open. Her eyelids flick. We stare at one another.

"Is that philodendron for me?" she finally asks, nodding at the dumb plant Cassandra shoved at me.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot I had it. You want me to put it over here?" I cross to the window and look back at her.

She shrugs. "I don't care. That's the third one of those I've gotten."

"Yeah. Gee, you've got a lot of flowers. They're pretty. Uh, who sent those red roses?"

She looks at me coldly and says, "Peter."

I swallow. Help me, God. Get me through this.

"What's that?"

"What? Oh, this." I laugh hollowly. "I forgot I was holding this. Uh, it's a copy of the, uh, editorial I wrote for the last issue of the *Viewpoint*. It goes to bed tomorrow, 'course you know that." Again with the nervous laugh. "I thought maybe you'd like to see it, maybe tell me how to improve it?"

There is total silence.

But then she holds her hand out and I give her the

sheet of typewriter paper. I'm still standing here when she finishes reading my editorial and looks up.

"Are you planning on sitting down, Mimi?"

"Oh, yeah. I didn't know, you know, if you wanted me to stay or if you were tired or—"

"Sit down."

I sit down.

"This isn't bad," Candy says, holding my editorial out to me. I take it from her. "Maybe you'll be the new editor next year," she says. "I'm not going back to McNally. My parents think I should go away to school."

"Yeah, that's probably a good—"

"I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

"Sure, Candy, anything." I swallow.

"Tell them . . . the kids at school . . . that I—I didn't mean to do—what happened."

"You weren't trying to . . . to . . ."

She smiles a little. "I didn't mean to set myself on fire, no. It was . . . an impulse. I wanted to scare you, to get even with Peter. I didn't realize gas fumes . . . could ignite like that. It was a stupid thing—"

"Well, I'm glad you're okay."

The nurse comes in then and tells me visiting hours are over. I stand up so fast that the chair goes over backward.

"I, ah, appreciate," Candy says, "seeing your editorial, Mimi. It's okay the way it is. Tell them to print it."

"Th-thanks, Candy. I hope you're feeling better soon. Bye, now."

"Bye, Mimi," she says, ultra-casual, as if she doesn't care. But I think she cares a lot. And I'm glad I came.

"Well?" Cassandra says as soon as I get into the car. "How was she?"

"Not too bad. She said she'd gotten three of those plants, though."

"Poor kid." Cassandra backs the car out of the parking space. "You know, Mimi, the longer I live the more I think people really do shape their own lives to a large degree. Some people seem to make up their minds they're going to make the best of life, get the most happiness they can in spite of all sorts of problems and others . . . well, there are plenty of others who buckle under to what life hands them."

As we drive down the steep hill in front of the hospital, Cassandra glances over at me, saying, "Like you, for instance. A lot of kids in your position might've given in to self-pity."

"How do you know I haven't?"

"Well, you don't show it, if you have," Cassandra says. "Look at all the kids you know or know of who've gotten loused up on drugs. You're one of the most stable kids I've seen. Of course, your father deserves some credit for that. But you do, too, Mimi."

She smiles at me and I think, God, wouldn't you know? I mean, I'm such a straight arrow I can't even turn something fairly dramatic like being abandoned

by my mother into something interesting. I'm just so boring.

"What're you sighing about?" Cassandra asks. "I'm complimenting you."

"Yeah, but sometimes I wish I weren't so . . . *wholesome* or something. I mean, I'm so straight. If it weren't for my frizzy hair, I'd probably make a perfect Breck Shampoo girl. Like right now, Cassandra!" I point at her. She's thrown her head back against the seat and is roaring with laughter. (Fortunately we're stopped at a red light.) "Like right now! I'm not trying to be funny and look at you!"

But I start laughing, too. It feels so good.

Chapter Twenty-One

Today is June 29, my sixteenth birthday. There is this absolutely enormous box from Aggie, which I'll open along with my other presents after dinner tonight. I'm no longer depressed that Aggie has finked out on me for the eightieth time, or that Lars is dating Lynnie Mettelman. I might get depressed about everything tomorrow or next week, but not today, my birthday. Today nothing can bother me.

I'm the type who thinks birthdays are the most wonderful day of the entire year. I'll bet I'm still like this when I'm seventy-five. And today has been the most terrific day.

First, the sun was just blasting through my curtains this morning. I couldn't sleep past seven thirty. Not that I wanted to. Then Tuna and Mrs. McElliott took

me and Cassandra out to lunch at their country club, which Mrs. McElliott thinks is very chi-chi. That's what she calls it. It means fancy as heck.

While Cassandra and Mrs. McElliott chewed the fat all day, Tuna and I swam and played tennis when we weren't flirting with this adorable lifeguard who goes to Dartmouth. Tuna says Dub has finally quit calling her, and her father's started speaking to her again. So things are a little better over at her house.

When we got home an hour ago, I opened my mail. No card from Aggie. I guess that telegram really was it, but I got one from Harriet. She says she's coming home because she absolutely *despises* Heritage House. There's no one there to talk to, she wrote, except old people. I got a laugh out of that one. She says she's told old maid Schwartz she's leaving as soon as they take the cast off. Which may be in two weeks.

She also sounds good and mad. I'm going to write back telling her there're a number of matters I have to discuss with her that are too personal to go into in a letter. That ought to get her going.

Dad and Cassandra are taking me out to dinner tonight. I'm having lobster, I've already decided. Dad said we can go wherever I want to and I want to go to the Wharf Restaurant downtown on the water. Plus there are three hundred presents for me down in the living room. Well, not exactly that many, but a lot. So I'm materialistic. On your birthday it's allowed.

Right now I'm resting. I'm lying on the floor with my feet propped up on the bed. I've also put used tea bags over my eyes. I read that used tea bags are supposed to be very soothing for pop eyes . . . takes the redness out, too. I think even the tea bags might not work considering I've been in the sun all day.

Cassandra says I look very healthy. She's really extremely nice to me.

Right after we got home from the country club, Tuna put my hair up in rollers. She says now that I'm sixteen the Campbell's soup can has to go. She insists that the way she's set my hair is going to work on the frizzies. I figure anything is an improvement.

"Mimi?" Cassandra calls. "Answer the door, will you? I'm in the bathtub."

I throw on a bathrobe and go downstairs.

There's a gorilla on our front door step. I'm about to slam the door when the gorilla breaks into song:

"Happy birthday to you!
Happy birthday to you!
Happy birthday, dear Mimi,
From your mother, guess who!"

Then the gorilla does a little jig. I'm laughing so hard by this time that I have to sit down on the floor. Cassandra bombs down the stairs in a bathrobe with a towel wrapped around her head. The gorilla is so

pleased by my reaction, I guess, that he comes inside and does this sick imitation of a gorilla jumping up and running around on the furniture. Now Cassandra's laughing, too.

Suddenly the gorilla stops and whips out an envelope. It's a note from Aggie.

> Happy birthday, Mimi. I miss you. Have I told you that? It's been too long since I've seen you. How old are you, anyway? Ha, ha, just kidding. Sherm and I are flying to New York on July 12. I promise this time. I'm sending a limo to pick you up. It'll whisk you into the city where we'll paint the town red. Cable me if you can't make it. I really do love you.
>
> Aggie

Now I'm crying *and* laughing.

"Uh . . . do you mind . . . awfully?" this muffled voice says. "This gorilla head is killing me." Off comes the gorilla head. "Hi!" this extremely cute, tall person says. "My name's Ralph. Ralph Litiwinsky. Your mother sent me." He smiles, revealing perfect teeth. I also notice, as I practically fall over being madly in love, that he has sparkly blue eyes, freckles, and curly dark hair.

"Uh, yeah . . ." I finally collect myself. "Um, I

figured that from the, uh, note. Aren't you hot in that . . . suit . . . Ralph?"

I'm trying not to freak out over the fact that I'm standing here in this decrepit bathrobe with these absolutely *huge* rollers all over my head talking to this adorable guy in a gorilla suit.

Cassandra looks from me to Ralph; her eyes are sparkling. Biting her lower lip, she says, "Would you two like a Coke?"

"I guess I would!" Ralph exclaims, following me into the kitchen. Ralph doesn't seem to notice my appearance. He's talking.

"You should've seen the looks I got from people on the parkway on the way down here!"

I open the refrigerator door and search for the Cokes.

"One old lady almost drove straight off the road. I had the suit on, though not the head. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to see well enough to drive. Anyway, this old lady was staring at me as she passed me. All I did was wave at her and she swerved . . ."

Ralph is some talker. After describing his drive, he tells me he met my mother at a party in New York thrown by *People* magazine. It turns out he's a struggling nineteen-year-old comic.

"I was one of the bartenders at the party and your mother is some super lady, Mimi! I've seen all her films and really admire her. She asked me for a drink

at this party and we got talking. I don't think she likes those big parties much. I told her how I wanted to break into the business more than anything in the world, but that I wasn't having much luck in the New York scene. That's when I told her that besides bartending I dress up as a gorilla to make a living. Delivering messages. And right away"—he snaps his fingers—"she hired me on the spot to come sing to you tonight. I'm really glad she did, too." He smiles at me, which makes the Coke go down the wrong pipe and I go into a choking fit.

Once Ralph has finished whomping me on the back and I've recovered what's left of my girlish composure, he starts talking again.

"You know what else your mother did? She got right on the phone and called up some guy she knew and guess what?"

"What, Ralph?"

"She got me in to Catch a Rising Star!"

"That's . . . really great."

"You've never heard of Catch a Rising Star, have you, Mimi?"

"Uh, no . . . I'm afraid I haven't."

"Well, you've got to come. I'll send you tickets. In fact, I'll be there when your mother's in town next month. It's *the* place for someone like me. It's a club where aspiring comics and singers and musicians perform in the hope of being noticed by a scout. If the right person sees you—well, you can just take off. One

break, just one, that's all I need." His blue eyes are glowing.

Ralph is still talking when Dad gets home. Cassandra tells me to go up and get dressed because we've got to go to dinner soon. Then Dad asks Ralph to go with us.

"Gosh, Mr. Canfield, you don't know how much I'd like to do that! Thanks a million. I haven't eaten in a good restaurant since I left Idaho, that's my home state, and that was eight months ago."

On the way to the restaurant, Ralph, who's sitting next to me in the backseat, says, "Your mother is a very kind lady, Mimi. And I sure am glad she hired me to come down here tonight." He pauses, then says, "You know something, Mimi? You're the first *real* girl I've met since I left Idaho. Sometimes I get tired of the hyper show-biz types, know what I mean?"

"Not exactly," I say, praying my salivary glands won't fail me as he puts his hand over mine for a moment.

I could kill Dad for getting us to the restaurant so fast.

During dinner Ralph asks my father if it's all right for me to go to Catch a Rising Star as his guest and Dad says it is. And, boy, I'm going, whether Aggie comes through this time or not. Nothing will keep me from going to see Ralph.

As we're driving home again through the soft, starry night, Ralph rests his head against the back of

the seat. We're sitting so close our shoulders touch, and he says, "I love summer. I always feel so optimistic in the summer. It's my favorite season."

"Mine, too," I say as he takes my hand, and for the moment it's true. No matter what tomorrow brings.

About the Author

Philippa Greene Mulford was born in New York City, grew up in Connecticut, and now lives in Clinton, New York. A former reporter and director of the Central New York Community Arts Council, she is a graduate of Skidmore College. *If It's Not Funny, Why Am I Laughing?* is her first novel.

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